University of Alberta

Yvette Nolan: Playwright in Context

by

Valerie Shantz ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of Drama

Edmonton, Alberta

Spring, 1998

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0-612-28909-5

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Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled: Yvette Nolan: Playwright in Context submitted by Valerie Shantz in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

David Barnet
Professor of Drama

Dr. Rosalind Kerr
Assistant Professor of Drama

Dr. John A. Hawkins
Assistant Professor of Drama

Nancy Gibson
Assistant Professor of Clinical Sciences

April 16, 1998

Abstract

This thesis is concerned with providing a critical context for my work with Yvette Nolan, a Winnipeg based playwright. I chose to pursue this topic because as a dramaturg and academic I have found few models on which to base our relationship. My underlying assumptions were that in approaching a dramatic text, a writer and her dramaturg represent an ongoing history of similar relationships. In order to reap from the success of other similar relationships, and to steer away from the potential problems experienced by others, I propose that a 'history-taking' is an essential dramaturgical tool. I chose to test this assumption in my work in approaching Nolan's newest play, *Annie Mae's Movement*, and my thesis reflects the process I followed before focusing on the text of the play. To this end, Chapter One is concerned with the history of white playwrights and their use of the Aboriginal subject in Canadian theatre. Chapter Two looks at the more recent history of Aboriginal playwrights in Canada. I also work with the assumption that recording moments of failure are as valuable as celebrating successes. Chapter Three is focused on Nolan's work, and my relationship to that work, and how these link with the findings of both Chapter One and Chapter Two. It specifically asks questions about the ways in which academic discourse can influence the reception and understanding of emerging writers, and the dangers inherent in that influence. My scholarship was informed by such theorists as Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak, who writes about post-colonial critics, and Linda Kintz, who writes about representations of race on the stage. For the specific demands of this project I also draw on the recorded experiences of various Canadian Aboriginal writers in their collaborations with white artists. My goal is that this work will be of value to theatre scholarship, not as a prescriptive process since each dramaturgical relationship is unique, but as one which offers a sensitive process demonstrating some of the possible pitfalls and successes of intercultural work.

Acknowledgments

The creation of this thesis has spanned several years and as a result many people have been involved.

Yvette Nolan's receptivity to the project and constant support have made this thesis and our working relationship, possible.

At the University there have been several key people. Debby Thompson encouraged my scholarship and the beginning stages of this thesis. Without Rosalind Kerr, it may never have been completed and I am grateful for the close readings that brought it to fruition. Thanks also to David Barnet, my supervisor and to Nancy Gibson whose support and work on my behalf as external reader was an unexpected gift. My fellow students provided me with valuable argument, discussion and support during my time at the University. Thanks in particular to Jonathan Christenson and Jane Heather. Special thanks to Siân Williams who has swiftly become a valuable part of my writing process(es).

Finally thanks to Bill Burrows who came with me on this journey to Alberta and later understood all of the absences the completion of this thesis required and to John and Rosalie Shantz who taught me the value of speaking my mind.

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Introduction:

Despite the recent emergence of Aboriginal writers in Canadian theatre there has been little critical context created within which to view their work. While Canadian theatre is gradually becoming more pluralistic, mainly through the work of smaller theatres, the vocabulary of criticism and analysis remains rooted in a particular kind of theatre. There is very little critical material available which deals with Native playwrights that is comparable to the body of work available for more established new dramatic sub-genres.

Compounding this problem of critical context is an extensive history of appropriation of the Native community and their culture. I am interested in exploring the ways in which dramaturgy can at the same time both assist new Native writers and work as a tool of appropriation, a problem I cannot separate myself from. I find that acknowledgement both an essential first step and paralyzing move. Is it possible for me as a dramaturg to advise outside of traditional notions of 'good' plays, an approach which can homogenize the work of non-white writers such as Nolan; i.e.: can dramaturgy serve to improve the play while still allowing, or even encouraging, difference? Perhaps more problematically, I know I will not always be able to tell the difference between steering a writer's work from what may be culturally specific, and what may be 'bad' theatrical product. With these misgivings in

mind, I am committed to this project and to the writer and so it is essential for me to find a way to continue. This demands a new dramaturgical approach to intercultural work.

In 1996 Yvette Nolan asked me to be the dramaturg on her new play, *Annie Mae's Movement*. She had written the play while working as Aboriginal Writer in Residence at Brandon University that autumn and wanted me to be involved in the rewrites to follow. Although in many ways the work on a new text would often be considered the beginning of a process, I believe that when the writer is Aboriginal and the dramaturg is white, there are other considerations that also come to the fore. My thesis is an exploration of one way a white dramaturg, in this case myself, chose to approach the work of a Native playwright. I felt it was important to pursue this topic because I found few positive models to guide my working relationship with Nolan and as a result we sought to find a viable path of our own.

When Nolan approached me I was excited, as I often am in approaching a new play, but apprehensive because it marked a challenge in our long standing working relationship. In the past I have worked primarily on her shorter works, most often as a second reader. However, *Annie Mae's Movement* is a 'full-length'[1] play and I am its sole dramaturg. It is slated for production in the Spring of 1998 with **Red Roots Theatre**[2] and has at its heart

First Nations politics. For all of these reasons, working with Nolan on this piece presented a particular set of circumstances that I wanted to be fully prepared for.

Annie Mae's Movement chronicles the life and death of Anna Mae Aquash, a Micmac woman from Halifax who became the only female warrior in the American Indian Movement (A.I.M.), an organization which A.I.M. organizer, Birgil Kills Straight calls a "catalyst for Indian Sovereignty."[3] Aquash's death was rife with suspicion. When she was found dead in the Badlands on Pine Ridge Reservation on February 24, 1976,[4] F.B.I. accounts explained that Aquash died of exposure. Many involved with A.I.M. believed that she had been murdered because of her intense political lobbying.[5] Nolan's play posits that Aquash could have been killed by the F.B.I. but just as easily died at the hands of A.I.M., who suspected her as an F.B.I. informant.

Red Roots Theatre, a Winnipeg company dedicated to the production of new Manitoba works by and about Aboriginal people, was to produce *Annie Mae's Movement*. Nolan wrote the play while working as Aboriginal Writer in Residence at **Brandon University** during the fall of 1996, with rewrites over the following year.

In approaching the project, I needed to evaluate what I brought to it. Part of what I bring to any play are my skills as a dramaturg but those skills are

influenced by what my relationship to the playwright is. It is in my work with Yvette Nolan that I am reminded of the significance of *who* writes and *for whom* most often. Nolan is a Winnipeg based writer who has been writing professionally since 1990. She has also worked in other aspects of Canadian theatre for the past fifteen years in roles which include directing, acting, stage management and administration. She is a feminist, an A.I.D.S. educator and an University instructor. These are only a few aspects of her identity. Another one is that Yvette Nolan was born in 1963 in Fort Saskatchewan to an Algonquin mother and Irish father. It is at this point of intersection, where Nolan as writer meets with Nolan as Metis woman, that I question where I, as a white woman, would fit in developing a script such as *Annie Mae's Movement* with its concerns for Aboriginal politics.

The writer I would be working with came with a varied history in the theatre. Nolan launched her career at the **Winnipeg Fringe Festival** in 1990 with *Blade*[6], an extremely successful production which was later remounted at both the **Best of the Fringe 1990** in Winnipeg and at the **Women in View Festival** in 1992. Nolan talks of *Blade* having come to her almost fully formed after an incident that parallels the main event in the play.[7] It was a very public debut. Randal McIlroy, of the Winnipeg Free Press called it "inarguably one of the most intriguing productions at this year's Fringe ...this is an astounding debut for Winnipeg director and first-time playwright Yvette

Nolan. *Blade* is intelligent, pertinent, deeply cynical and, in both its scope and attitude, impressively ambitious."[8]

Kim McCaw, at the time Artistic Director of Winnipeg's **Prairie Theatre Exchange**, was also initially impressed.

> It was a good story well told. It was well controlled as a piece of theatre in terms of its scale; as a relatively new writer she wasn't trying to do something she couldn't handle. Its goal as a piece was really clear and the dramaturgy[9] on it was pretty solid. It was successful as a piece of snappy, driven drama.[10]

After this critical and popular success it was over a year before Nolan's next piece surfaced. *Job's Wife*, another one-act piece, was produced by **Theatre Projects**, a small company dedicated to the production of new Manitoba work. This play incorporated the use of dance and a figure of God in the form of an Aboriginal male. It won Nolan some critical success and was later published with *Blade* in both the now defunct Canadian theatre magazine THEATRUM and a book containing a collection of three of Nolan's plays: *Job's Wife*, *Blade* and *Child*.

Following productions included *Smaller* (1992), her first full-length piece and another production to be part of the **Winnipeg Fringe Festival**, and *Some of My Best Friends Are...*, a piece written for **Popular Theatre Alliance of**

Manitoba (P.T.A.M.) and performed throughout Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario in 1991 and 1992. One of her most often performed pieces has been *Everybody's Business*, an AIDS education play, also commissioned and produced by **P.T.A.M.** and performed from 1990 - 1993. Other **P.T.A.M.** projects included *Common Ground*, an environmental piece for outdoor performance co-written by Nolan with Shawna Dempsey, Kris Purdy and Margo Charlton. Throughout this period she also continued to write a number of short pieces including *Video*, produced by **Theatre Projects** (and directed by Kim McCaw) in the **Short Shot Series** (1992), *Guernsey* written for and performed by dancer D-Anne Kuby (1992), and *Child*, written in 1993 but produced for the first time by the **3rd International Women's Playwrights Festival** in 1994.

After some criticism about *Smaller*, Nolan took some time off from writing full-length plays before writing *A Marginal Man*. *Smaller* was a dark comedy about a feminist comedy troupe where one comedian is sleeping with her colleague's husband. Many were offended by the central action of a shrinking penis which acted as punishment for the husband's infidelity. Unfortunately criticism of this nature overshadowed other potentially constructive criticism for this two Act play which had its life and death, so far, at the Fringe.

With *A Marginal Man* on its way, Nolan garnered national and local media attention. As she conducted interviews on **Vicki Gabereau**[11], and **The Arts Tonight**,[12] this much heralded production was announced as having the potential to launch her career.[13] There was a great deal of pressure around the production, only her second full-length play. As with *Smaller*, critical reaction was not positive. The action of the play surrounds a man, Adam, whose female co-worker, Claire, is being stalked by an abusive ex-partner. Claire becomes more and more concerned for her safety, and when Adam starts up a white ribbon[14] campaign at work, many of their co-workers become very uncomfortable. Tension between the co-workers who want Adam to let the issue drop and Claire, whose fear of her partner escalates, ends when Claire shoots Adam, mistaking him for her stalker. There is a strong message here: violence begets violence and one man's attempt to stop it isn't enough. Nolan's tone was criticized. Kevin Prokosh of the Winnipeg Free Press sums up a common reaction by the local critics. "In its haste to score ideological points, *A Marginal Man* scrambles to do-it-all for its viewers. Nolan strives to control the emotional response of the audience every step of the 130 minute production, and then impose a strict, narrow meaning."[15]

This play, produced by **Popular Theatre Alliance of Manitoba**, was a popular success but was largely dismissed by the critics as being too moralistic. For

Kim McCaw, where *Blade* had worked theatrically, and *Job's Wife* less so, *A Marginal Man* was a theatrical failure. He commented:

> ...the drama, the humanity of it never really got a chance. I never really cared about the characters. The issues became issues. I saw this as another evolution down this path I was concerned about [earlier] where the whole nature of dramaturgical support or critical eye was disappearing so that the work was moving away from being successful theatrically.[16]

The plays described above comprise the body of work that *Annie Mae's Movement*. As dramaturg it seems important to acknowledge the criticisms of Nolan's past work and yet it is difficult to reconcile these criticisms with the kind of national and international profile that this playwright is developing. Is this merely the elevation of a token Metis Woman to beyond her worth as an artist? Yvette Nolan is a playwright who has been persistently asked to represent Canada at international festivals, has been published three times and who has been nominated for both the **James Buller Award for Playwrighting** from the **Centre for Indigenous Theatre** (1997) and the **John Hirsch Award for Most Promising New Writer** (1995). Nolan as a Metis woman is often cast into the role of community role model, spokesperson and critic of the mainstream[17] and yet she does not consider

herself to be completely welcome within either Aboriginal or white communities, generally finding herself in conflict with the roles set out for her by others. Her success outside of Canada and prominence as a national artist,[18] seems to be at odds with her virtual inability to get a production with any of the major theatres in Canada.

Where do these conflicting factors arising from her public prominence and limited artistic success leave the dramaturg set to work on her newest play? Traditionally the dramaturgical approach to new play development is based solely on the text of the play in question. One of the functions of dramaturgy is to assist writers in fully realizing their work. This can be achieved in several ways; the most common way is to simply read the work and respond to it as an initial outsider. Another is to work with the writer to find out what they were wanting to accomplish and then find the ways to bring their vision into line with the original impression. Then it may be possible to find which of those blendings are desirable or, alternately, problematic.

However, I believe that there is other important dramaturgical work to be done before approaching a new text. In addition to these questions surrounding the environment of the specific play, I believe it is also important to understand the world within which it has been created. That 'world' is the context within which the writer exists. In this case I am

interested in who Yvette Nolan is in the context of her community. I mean community in many senses: her professional community, her geographic community and her Native Canadian community. That requires an understanding of the presence of history of Aboriginal peoples in Canadian theatre, and a close examination of the changes that their representation has undergone. Similarly it is crucial to look at the history of influence of non-Aboriginal writers on Aboriginal theatre, especially since natives were originally introduced on the Canadian stage by white writers who wrote Aboriginal characters that were often seen as speaking for Aboriginal people.

In order to develop a critical context to place the work of Yvette Nolan I needed to understand how other Aboriginal writers approached Canadian theatre. This information, in combination with an understanding of how non-native influences has affected Native theatre helped me to form a theatrical context for Nolan. It was only when this context became clear to me that I could look at her past work and begin to formulate my approach to *Annie Mae's Movement*. The following thesis is a guide to that process.

I start from the assumption that what is currently happening in contemporary Aboriginal theatre is necessarily affected, and best understood, in the light of history. In approaching the work of Nolan in particular I knew I needed to understand how both our roles are necessarily affected by other

people in similar roles. In her case other playwrights - both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, who have looked at Aboriginal subjects, and in mine other white writers who have affected the reception of the 'Aboriginal subject'. This thesis looks at the dramaturgical work I have undertaken (out of its original chronology) before beginning the traditional text work on *Annie Mae's Movement*. With this I hope to demonstrate that in approaching an individual play as a dramaturg, many things are being approached at the same time including the writer, the context in which they live and work, and the context within which the dramaturg lives and works.

In respect to the set up of the thesis, I choose to narrate the history 'toward' my relationship with Yvette Nolan. By 'toward' I mean that I am interested in looking at the steps that lead to a writer such as Yvette Nolan and the ways in which ethnicity affects those steps. I choose this approach in narrating the history because I am interested in emphasizing that no writer exists outside of history. Nolan's work is necessarily influenced in its form and content by the work that has gone before it. In addition, I see my relationship with Nolan as exisiting on a kind of continuum of which writers in the past of Canadian theatre history exist. By starting with this past, and moving closer in chronology to Nolan, I trace what I believe is one aspect of a solid dramaturgical approach - to understand what has gone before and how that

might affect both the writer and audience's experience of an individual play. To that end I trace the presence of an Aboriginal theatre.

In Chapter One, "Paving the Way", I look at the interest of white writers in Aboriginal characters. In researching the history of Canadian Aboriginal writers and their relationships to white writers I wanted to trace some of the influential works in theatre that were particularly relevant to that relationship. I use them as touchstones to reflect a form of narrative on the subject. As part of the process towards collecting that history I look at critical reactions to the plays at the time of their exposure, forewords to the plays themselves, and to current reflections by both white and Aboriginal writers on those influential plays.

In Chapter Two, "Naming Names: Aboriginal Theatre in Canada", I look at the development of Aboriginal theatre in Canada over the past decade, from the advent of Tomson Highway's work forward. In both chapters I point briefly to the context within which these approaches existed in order to detail how that context provided for those particular approaches to 'Aboriginal theatre'.

In Chapter Three, "Colonizing and Yvette Nolan: The Making of an Aboriginal Playwright", I draw on my own working relationship with Yvette Nolan and the text of her earlier plays - most specifically that of *Blade* and

Child. In order to do my research I drew from interviews, was influenced by personal experience and sought out theoretical approaches by other writers concerned with the same issues. It is in this chapter that I most closely address the question of appropriation. Central to this discussion is my understanding of colonization. With the advent of post-colonial theory comes a dilemma which Alan Filewod outlines in his introduction to a shared Australia/ Canada issue of Canadian Theatre Review.

> Post-colonialism is a problematic formulation, in part because [...] it implies a state of emergence from colonialism, whereas in fact [...] post-colonial societies find themselves defined and often confused by intersecting and very present colonialisms. [19]

The "present colonialisms" that Filewod refers to act on the work of Native writers and white dramaturgs. I posit that dramaturgy can function as a tool of colonization and that, combined with my academic work, my choices in how to represent Nolan's work affect its reception. I approach it as a potential form of colonization to recognize its potential danger. If, in its most basic definition, colonization is defined as denying the colonized a voice in their own culture[20], does dramaturgy potentially interfere with the voice of a Native playwright, adapting it to speak in another voice, in this case that of the white colonizer? These are the issues I face in the final chapter, which

moves the thesis from an attempt at objective history-taking to a necessary look at the tensions between that history and current experience.

Notes

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[1] I want to acknowledge that Nolan takes offense at the idea of a full-length play. Where there has been some criticism of her work, given that it tends to fall short of a three act , one intermission format, Nolan asserts that the concept of a full-length play is an inherently biased one, given that some plays are best served in a shorter format.

[2] Red Roots Theatre is a Winnipeg based theatre company dedicated to the production of new Manitoba works by and about Aboriginal people

[3] From a document from A.I.M.'s 25th Anniversary Conference/International Peoples Summit. September 1 - 6, 1993.

[4] There is debate about the year of Aquash's death. Some believe that she may have died as early as late 1975.

[5] Buffy Sainte Marie immortalized her in her song 'Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee' with the lyric 'My Girlfriend Annie Mae, she talked about Uranium, they filled her head with bullets, and [had] her body dumped, the FBI cut off her hands and said she died of exposure'. Coincidence and Likely Stories (EMI, 1992).

[6] Yvette Nolan, *Blade*, Theatrum Magazine 31 (1992/93): S1-5.

[7] Yvette Nolan, personal interview, March 1993. Subsequent quotations are from this interview.

[8] Randal McIlroy, "Unfinished but compelling tale astounding debut for playwright," Winnipeg Free Press 23 July, 1990: 17.

[9] Laurie Lam, a Winnipeg writer and theatre administrator, served as dramaturg on *Blade*.

[10] Kim McCaw, personal interview, 17 September, 1997.

[11] Popular talk show host with national CBC AM radio show which ran afternoons across the country until August 1997.

[12] Another CBC radio show runs evenings on CBC FM.

[13] Kevin Prokosh, Winnipeg Free Press, 1 October, 1993: C1.

[14] Similar to the AIDS red ribbon, the white ribbon is worn as a sign of opposition to violence against women.

[15] Kevin Prokosh, "Play Stirs Thoughts but Stumbles," Winnipeg Free Press, 26 February, 1994: B9.

[16] McCaw Interview.

[17] For my purposes 'mainstream' refers to representatives of the established, or dominant, culture.

[18] As well as being the vice-president of the editorial board of the Playwrights Union of Canada, Nolan was recently a judge for the **Governor General's Award** for Playwriting along with Bryden MacDonald and Judith Thompson (1996 Award).

[19] Alan Filewod, "Staging Post-colonialism(s)", Canadian Theatre Review 74/ Spring 1993: 3.

[20] Marilyn French, as discussed in Laura E. Donaldson's Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender and Empire Building , (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1992),134.

Chapter One:

Paving the Way

> Throughout America, from north to south, the dominant culture acknowledges Indians as objects of study, but denies them as subjects of history. The Indians have folklore, not culture; they practice superstitions, not religions; they speak dialects, not languages; they make crafts, not arts.[21]
>
> Eduardo Galeano

> One need only observe that *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* by the non-Native playwright, George Ryga, is still included in representative Canadian literature courses in high schools and on university campuses while the works of Native playwrights languish on warehouse shelves to make the point that appropriation is an issue of serious concern.[22]
>
> Agnes Grant

One way to develop a theatrical context for the work of Yvette Nolan is to look at the current state of Aboriginal theatre and, at what has led to these activities. To this end I will address several questions: What is an Aboriginal or Native theatre? Does one exist in Canada? Who is involved, and in what capacities? While looking at these questions, I want to address the concern

from Aboriginal people that their voices tend to be ignored in favour of white 'experts' discussing their work. In responding to this serious concern, I , as a white writer, will attempt to use the words of Aboriginal artists as much as possible in the discussion of these issues.

An inequity is easily described: there is ethnic diversity in Canada's population, and this diversity includes a strong Native presence, but this is not reflected in Canadian theatre. Robert Wallace, in his essay "Producing Marginality", sees Canadian theatre as a whole threatened by approaches which are out of date.

> Canadian demographics have changed rapidly in the last 20 years along with changes in immigration and settlement patterns; many of the identities and stories that were socially relevant no longer apply. Similarly, many of the theatrical forms created to tell these stories have become worn and wanting - formulaic structures that repeat rather than redefine the myths that shape and express Canadian identities. These must be put aside for the new and eclectic forms of theatrical expression that have been marginalized to the periphery of Canadian theatre.[23]

For the purposes of looking at Yvette Nolan, I am primarily interested in exploring emerging Aboriginal theatre. In fact, long before Aboriginal people

began to write for the stage, there was already a fascination with the Canadian Indian by non-Native artists, and their 'material' is far more established on the Canadian stage than that of Aboriginal writers. In fact, several plays which are considered to be seminal to the early development of a Canadian theatre canon involve Aboriginal characters. Thus, in order to provide a historical framework, it is worth describing the representations of the Native in plays by these non-aboriginal writers. *The Great Hunger* by Leonard Peterson[24], *Esker Mike and His Wife, Agiluk: Scenes from Life in the Mackenzie River Delta* by Herschel Hardin, *Riel* by John Coulter, and later *Walsh* by Sharon Pollock, all played a significant role in the development of contemporary Canadian theatre.[25]

This interest in the Aboriginal subject did not always lead to an actual Aboriginal presence in the production itself. For example, in the published production notes to his play, *The Great Hunger*, Leonard Peterson justifies the use of non-Native actors.

> In casting, talent should take precedent over Eskimo-like physiognomy. The range in Eskimo features is substantial. By the late 1920's it was estimated that more than half of all Eskimos had some white blood in their veins. The likelihood is that many Eskimos, long

> before they made contact with white culture (some as late as 1923), had inherited white blood from their peregrinating ancestors.[26]

This justification is in part a reflection of the reality of the period in which Peterson wrote, since very few indigenous Canadian actors were working in Canadian Theatre. *The Great Hunger* was first produced in 1960 and was significant in placing Inuit characters on stage for the first time.[27] However, the lack of an actual Aboriginal presence on Peterson's stage is more than just a reflection of the acting community at that point. Peterson's discussion of the influences upon his understanding of Inuit people is telling:

> The literature on Eskimos is considerable and fascinating. Certainly it is advisable, before attempting a production of *The Great Hunger*, to become familiar with the Arctic culture. I commend the following authors to you: W.E. Parry, G.F. Lyon, Kaj Birket-Smith, Franz Boas, Knud Rasmussen, Diamond Jenness, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, Farley Mowat, Raymond De Coccola, Doug Wilkinson, Gontran de Poncins, L.M. Turner, E.M. Weyer and Peter Freuchen. [28]

Peterson's remarks suggest that storytellers and elders from the Inuit communities are secondary sources to the opinions of outside anthropologists and historians. This view of the Inuit, as a subject with little voice in their representation, gives an indication of the problems of

appropriation, stereotyping and tokenism that Aboriginal artists were facing in 1960, and which continue to resonate in current scholarship and theatre production practices.

George Ryga's play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1967) was to be far more significant in the representation of the Canadian Aboriginal than any play preceding it. Nine years after its first production, Jamie Portman's review, as published by the Vancouver Province, credited it with beginning a change in attitude towards Canadian writing:

> *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* ... more than any other play touched off a Canadian cultural ferment that still continues today. This was an indigenous Canadian drama that surfaced and succeeded at a time when indigenous Canadian drama was generally considered to be an aberration. It was a play of merit, worthy of production in any Canadian theatre. It prompted an awareness of the existence of other plays potentially worthy of production. It provided resounding evidence that it was not necessary for any Canadian theatres to rely solely on imported fare. With the arrival of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, Canadian plays ceased to be a rarity in English-speaking Canada. Companies dedicated to the production of new Canadian drama sprang

up, and in so doing nurtured the further growth of playwriting activity.[29]

This is a retrospective view. When it was first produced *...Rita Joe* met with conflicting reviews. James Barber of the Vancouver Province was impressed: "It is a documentary of a bewildered and confused people, a misunderstood people with strange gods caught up in the irreconcilable conflict that arises from imposing the urban and organized values of society on simple, rural children."[30]

This was not the only view. Nathan Cohen[31] bears repeating in his rejection of both Ryga's view of the Native and the style of theatre through which he chose to communicate.

> George Ryga has written a non-play, and director George Bloomfield has given it a non-production. The rationale with misfortunes of this kind is to suggest that although the play is a calamity and the production a scandal, those connected with it meant well and the problem is real. But if good intentions are not good enough excuse for social mistreatment and discrimination in real life, why should they be considered extenuable on stage?
>
> *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* only adds to the red man's sack of burdens and woes. Indefensible as art, it is unpardonable as a tract. It fails to

> influence the ignorant and the indifferent, and it weakens the faith of the converted.[32]

The significance of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* was not to be realized until years later. It eventually acquired a reputation and international prominence that extended far beyond the confines of the Canadian theatrical community. The emergence of*The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, and the reception accorded it, constitute an event of national importance.[33] For fifteen years after its original production in Vancouver in 1967, the play was produced at such regional theatres across the country as **Playhouse Theatre** in Vancouver, **Factory Lab Theatre** in Toronto, and **Manitoba Theatre Centre** and **Prairie Theatre Exchange (P.T.E.)** in Winnipeg. Few of these productions were fully cast with Aboriginal actors in the Aboriginal roles. Margo Kane, an actress at the time was up for the role of Rita Joe at Edmonton's **Citadel Theatre** but instead was cast in the minor role of Eileen Joe. The white woman who played Rita Joe floundered in the role, and as a result it was Kane who received the commendation of reviewers.[34] Kane did go on to play Rita Joe for **Prairie Theatre Exchange**'s production, and regards her involvement with the play as a turning point in her career.

> At any rate the history of ...*Rita Joe* is an important show for me. It (P.T.E.) was a smaller theatre and we toured. By the time it came, it didn't have the impact that it potentially could have had. First Nations

> issues were not big - it was '82' - but it still gave me an opportunity to be in a bigger centre and to get some TV and Film. It opened up lots of doors for me.[35]

It was also a pivotal play for Canadian theatre. However, there is a difference in the way that *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* was received in the late '60's and '70's and the way it might be received today. For example, as Agnes Grant points out:

> Assimilation was official Canadian policy when Ryga wrote *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*[36]. Great efforts were being made to educate and mold Indians to become part of mainstream Canadian society, though the Indians themselves had never been consulted about whether or not assimilation was their aim. [...] it was generally expected that assimilation would take place and that the demise of Indian culture would accompany this assimilation.[37]

Seen through this lens, Rita Joe's seemingly inevitable downfall as a character takes on a heightened significance. *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* has to be seen within the context of the time it was written, and within this context we see the merit of this play at that time. However, it is now thirty years later. The political force of Aboriginal people in Canada in the 1990's is much stronger as many Native communities move towards self-government and

assimilation is no longer the stated goal of the Canadian government. As a result, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* is a politically dated play, but one that tells us a great deal about the audiences for whom it was originally written. It reflects Canadian society at a particular point in its history. Just as the political climate surrounding Aboriginal people in Canada has changed, so must the plays that reflect that reality.

...*Rita Joe* was the most successful of several plays about Aboriginal subjects. In the context of a Canadian theatre history consistently dominated by white writers, this creation of work about Aboriginal characters is significant. Although Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* and *Indian* look at Aboriginal characters, they do so from Ryga's non-Native perspective, and as a result, Ryga cannot be called a Native writer any more than W.V. Valgardson, although he wrote many short stories set on a reserve. "Native," in this discussion, denotes ethnicity, not content.

Other Canadian literature has included its own set of assumptions about Aboriginal people and how they are represented. Thomas King, in his introduction to The Native in Literature in 1987,[38] refers to "three visions of the Indian: the dissipated savage, the barbarous savage, and the heroic savage" as representing the full but limited range of Indian characters in literature up to that time. Agnes Grant, in "Contemporary Native Women's

Voices in Literature," sees this interest in Aboriginal characters as telling more about the writer than the subject.

> [Natives] have been used by numerous Canadian writers as subject matter, as metaphor, as social commentary, but this writing serves only to illuminate the character of non-Native Canadian Society while leaving the character of Natives largely untouched. [39]

W.H. New in his introduction to Native Writers: Canadian Writing agrees:

> The time is not so distant when the 'Native' was a conventional figure in Canadian literature - but not a voice (or a figure allowed separate voices). If Native characters spoke, they spoke in archaisms or without articles, in the sham eloquence of florid romance or the muted syllables of deprivation. If Native characters moved, they moved according to Europ[illegible]n schedules of arrangement, as faithful friends or savage foes, or as marginal figures the mighty could afford to ignore.[40]

Many writers who are Aboriginal see the interest by Canadians in the Aboriginal subject as merely an extension of a long history of appropriation. Lisa Mayo, co-founder of the New York based **Spiderwoman Theatre**, is suspicious of current interest in Native spirituality and ritual.

> Native peoples today are survivors of a holocaust that is still continuing. Many of our ceremonies, languages and whole nations

were obliterated. These sacred ways of knowledge went underground. Now, these people who are dissatisfied with their own spirituality want our spirituality. They think that we possess something that they want. They've taken so much and now they've come for our spirituality, and if they take that, we're really lost. That will be the end of Native people.[41]

This sense of siege seems warranted, given Canadian history. During the early twentieth century, it was commonly believed that in order for Native people to survive as individuals, all things that made their culture unique and distinct from those of other Canadians had to be destroyed.[42] Canadian Natives were not made citizens of Canada, nor given the right to vote, until the 1960's.[43] It is therefore not surprising that there are few reliable collections of writing from Aboriginal people until after this point. Even those "reliable" collections were heavily edited by non-Native missionaries, anthropologists, and hobbyists.[44]

W.H. New, an academic from UBC, was at a loss to put together a collection of Native writing in the 1960's. "I looked at my sources and I said, 'I can't [publish Aboriginal work] because in the 1960's there was no, or hardly any Native fiction or poetry or drama".[45] Whether there was an actual lack of Native fiction and poetry, or just a lack of officially recorded fiction and poetry, is debatable. Whatever the case, there was not a great deal of theatrical

writing until the past two decades. Helmut Lutz suggests that the reason that we have only recently seen results of this writing is primarily economic:

> Poetry was and still is the most predominant genre used by Native authors and other People of Colour In North America. In the case of Native authors, this may have to do with structural affinities between poetry and certain ritualized forms of oratory. More generally, however, the phenomenon is related to the 'bread and butter' issue addressed earlier, that is, for a person preoccupied with economic survival, writing a short poem may be a more feasible undertaking than the sustained and costly effort of writing a full-length novel or drama.[46]

Despite these kinds of barriers and the marked discrepancy between the writer and represented, there has been increasing desire by indigenous writers to participate in the theatrical industry of Canada. This trend has resulted in an increasing number of written plays. Mainstream culture has clearly communicated, as Peterson's introduction to *The Great Hunger* demonstrates, that those who write will be valued. In addition, although most of the Canadian Aboriginal population may consider themselves to be on the margins, they are far from outside of the culture that most affects them. Yvette Nolan addresses this point in a discussion with Albert-Reiner

Glaap. "We are all affected by daily contact with mainstream dominant culture, so our work may reflect that sensibility more than anything else."[47]

Now that there is an Aboriginal writing community, some common themes can be found in their work. One predominant theme within contemporary Aboriginal writing, both fictional and documentary, is the history of Aboriginal people's contact with Europeans. In these texts, as well as in criticism by non-Natives of Native creative work, space is consistently dedicated to looking at the historical context within which this work exists. The following is only an example of the many ways this history can be told; it also serves as a preface to the typical expression of anger of Aboriginal people. Jordan Wheeler in his article in 'Our Own Stories' provides this narrative:

> Aboriginal people have been victimized, there is little doubt about that, and it began at very first contact with Europeans. Early scientists found only 87 known ailments common to the Aboriginal people. Back home in Europe, there were 30,000. The immune systems of the Aboriginal people had very little to contend with and were no match for scourges like smallpox, typhoid, tuberculosis, and influenza that riddled Europe. ...Not long after that, all their children were institutionalized in boarding schools. The tragic plummet of a mighty people created internalized anger, alcohol addiction, and severe social problems related to extreme poverty. Pitted in the struggle for their

very survival, the Aboriginal story is emerging today to reflect that powerful struggle, and evidenced by the presence of Aboriginal people today, the struggle has been won.[48]

Mainstream Canadian theatre has presented one version of Native theatre. How does the Native theatre community define itself? Tomson Highway, prominent playwright and cultural leader within the Aboriginal community, defines it as follows:

> Well, we have a mythology that is thousands and thousands of years old, which was almost destroyed, or some of it obliterated, by the onslaught of missionaries and affected by Christian religion. But, I suppose, when you do that to something, inevitably, the spirit of it survives even more strongly, and the mythologies too. It's coming back, it's still very much alive. It just went underground.
>
> It's still very much alive in our spirits, although it's not an intellectual thing necessarily. But the spirit is infused with it - our people. And the vitality, and the relevancy of it, and the immediacy of it are very much with us. Whereas we have people - and the way our writing is coming on proves it - that you know there is this connection with God. There is a spirituality that still is so powerful and beautiful and passionate. Whereas, in the case of mainstream culture here on this

> continent, both American and Canadian, we find that the mythology that they came over with is - their relationship to that mythology is really an academic relationship. It's not a living thing any more.[49]

In providing this discussion of Native theatre, Highway judiciously avoids naming particular characteristics of the theatre itself. For example, he does not say that Native theatre must have a trickster character, or include an indigenous language within it. Thomas King, a Native academic, also suggests that a definition can be problematic:

> I'm quite comfortable talking about Native literature without trying to define it. And that particular definition is as far as I am willing to go. Because as soon as you start to talk about what is Native in the literature itself, you run into all sorts of trouble. As soon as you start to try to describe who is an Indian and who is not - oh, it's a mess. You can say "Native literature is literature produced by Native people," as long as you don't ask "who is Native?"[50]

Agnes Grant's definition is much less concerned with the complexities of identity. To her, Native literature "means Native people telling their own stories, in their own ways, unfettered by criteria from another time and place." In each of these definitions, the important fact is that Native theatre must be created by Native people. Where does this leave a play such as Ryga's

...*Rita Joe*? Its significance as an important play within the Canadian canon is not in dispute, but any argument that Native voices have necessarily been represented in Canadian theatre via white writers who have been fascinated by an Aboriginal subject or character is probably misguided, especially if that is seen to replace the need for Aboriginal people telling their own stories.

Until recently there have been very few Aboriginal people writing for the stage. Even now, in the midst of what has been dubbed a 'Native Renaissance' in the Arts, there are only a handful of Native playwrights. One difficulty for many Native writers is the debate between whether Native theatre is simply theatre by Native people or must be theatre which concerns Native themes, characters and elements. Thomas King suggests that there is no more a monolithic 'Native' world any more than there is a uniform 'white' world.[51] He continues, suggesting that the assertion that 'the matter of race imparts to the Native writer a tribal understanding of the universe' is 'romantic, mystical, and in many instances, a self-serving notion'. American playwright Hanay Geiogamah reminds us of the recent past in American Theatre history (which should resonate for Canadians) where only show dancing and historical pageants designed for the entertainment of non-Indians were seen as the only acceptable concept of Native theatricality.[52] He calls for an American Indian Theater to be evolved out of the framework of Indian traditions, coming from sensitive approaches that avoid misusing or

cheapening the Indian forms, most of which are tied to religion.[53] As an example of the ongoing dialogue about allowing a definition of Native theater to evolve, as opposed to setting down rules which fix that definition, Geiogamah suggests that it may be premature to set down rules since "One must acknowledge the fact that no pure traditional form of Indian theater presently exists - one must be created."[54] Marilyn McGillvary, artistic director of **Awasikan Theatre**, a company made up of Aboriginal actors based in Winnipeg, also does not see a clear choice between traditional or innovative approaches.

> There has to be a blend with the new world and the old. It's not realistic to be totally traditional and we can't be totally contemporary because we lose our identity as [Aboriginal] people. [55]

In the introduction to Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women, Paula Gunn Allen talks about this tension.

> ...the obstacles emanate from home as much as from academia: I recall long ago John Rouillard, the then Santee Sioux director of Native American Studies in San Diego, asking the germane and humorous question, *Do Indians write novels?* during a Modern Language Association seminar on American Indian literature. We literary

> people in the session laughed, recognizing the quixotic nature of his query and our situation. Is it Indian to write novels - and by extension to write poetry, plays, essays, short stories, and criticism? Every Indian in the room who engaged in any of these activities had to ask whether we were really Indian. Maybe not, if we were writers. We had to ask ourselves if we were traitors to our Indianness. Maybe we were so assimilated, so un-Indian, that we were doing white folks' work and didn't realize it![56]

Is a 'true' Aboriginal theatre one without fixed text? Aboriginal writers across the disciplines struggle between their historic roots in oral culture, and a desire to do work that meets their contemporary reality. Monique Mojica is bitter about a Canadian culture which she sees demanding assimilation of its Aboriginal peoples while questioning those same people's right to use the language they have, in some cases, been forced to learn.

> Native writers' and playwrights' works are analyzed in courses with such titles as 'Post Colonial Writing.' Here, scholars and their students debate the validity of Native writers' 'appropriation' of the English language (since in many cases we neglect to also adopt its form). This argument is a painful reminder that this 'appropriation' of language was not a matter of choice but of force. We don't even need to go back one generation for the stories of beatings endured for daring to speak

> one's own Aboriginal language in the educational institutions of Canada and the United States. Now, we must take back that power and meet the challenge of supporting our work's validity, even in academia, even among the critics.[57]

Is it possible that the orality debate on 'what is truly Native' is simply a way of keeping an under-represented group neutralized? By encouraging Aboriginal people to maintain their oral culture in the interests of 'tradition', does the white mainstream not potentially absent them from discourse which happens on paper and in the written word? Emma LaRoque sees this as a great danger to those living in the contemporary world. "...illiteracy does render people voiceless in the life of a country that revolves around the printed word."[58] As much of traditional Aboriginal culture revolved around storytelling, drama should not be an unexpected outgrowth. Agnes Grant suggests "that drama is a particularly appealing genre should come as no surprise. Love of ritual, pantomime and rich body language were integral aspects of traditional storytelling."[59]

Although this common interest in storytelling and drama has a kinship, Aboriginal artists have continued to struggle with the tension between orality and writing. One of the strategies employed has been to refigure the ways in which new material is developed, so that the birth of a piece sometimes

happens 'on its feet', instead of 'on the page'. Saskatchewan's **Upisasik Theatre** is one such example.

> This [in referring to **Upisasik**'s collected works] like most of the drama of **Upisasik Theatre**, was developed through improvisation, with the script changing from performance to performance. Only after it was all over were many of these scenes transcribed from audio to video tapes so that we might have a written record of them.[60]

This is also familiar territory to Muriel Miguel, co-founder, director and performer with **Spiderwoman Theatre**, the longest-running feminist theatre company in the U.S..

> Sometimes, my job was to collect all this [storytelling], write it down, even hand out scripts and start working on one story. We would pull the story apart and people would start weaving into the story so we'd have big sections.[61]

In addition to challenging typical play development styles, many Aboriginal artists are being challenged by the limited funding structures available to support their work. In their article "Funding for Visible Minorities: A Minority Within a Minority,"[62] Robin Breon and Brenda Kamino suggest that given that "Artists are, by and large, a minority within any given society. In Canada today visible minorities working in the arts constitute a minority

within this minority." This minority status leads to several additional problems in accessing funding to the already present funding crisis for most theatre workers. Securing funding for companies that have three strikes against them from the outset ("they're new, they're small, and they're not white"[63]) is difficult. Breon and Kamino do not advise looking to the private sector, as "Corporate support of the arts is based on the rather crude philosophy of getting the 'biggest bang for the bucks"[64] and as a result may be unlikely to take a chance with an unproven or politically risky company. If corporate sponsorship is improbable, most minority companies need to focus their fundraising efforts on public grants. As the current funding structures are based upon a system of peer review, this presents its own difficulties. Who are their peers? Should juries be chosen on the basis of ethnic representation or artistic diversity? In either case, who will judge the judges, and what become the guiding principles in this evaluation? Robert Wallace, in his book Producing Marginality, goes further to ask:

> ...*who sits on arts juries* is not the primary question to ask, indeed, *who doesn't sit on juries* is a more important query. But, surely, *who picks the juries* is even more pertinent, as is the question *who picks the officers who pick the juries?* As these questions tumble into one another like a chain of dominoes they indicate that the nature of the

> problem is systemic, not personal. It is the system of power relations, not the people who compose it, that ultimately must be interrogated[65].

Given the other considerations that are taken in the selection of juries, such as finding a collection of jurists who are available, willing, and who represent a fair geographic range, finding a suitable jury can be very difficult for arts councils.[66]

For many Aboriginal artists, their status as professional and amateur is problematic. Kevin McKendrick, Canada Council officer in 1991, admitted that a certain amount of 'buck passing' had gone on in the past when it came to providing adequate funding to groups representing minorities.[67] For example, the Secretary of State for Multiculturalism, which funds a number of community-based performing groups, may refuse funding to a group because they are too 'professional', while at the same time the Canada Council may refuse funding to the same organization because in its estimation they are not professional enough. In closing and in the face of further funding cuts for all sectors of the arts, Breon and Kamino ask a series of questions:

> Will the next decade provide an expanded context for artists from many different ethnic backgrounds to celebrate Canada's pluralism, or will we see a narrowing of the field - a retreat to the 'high' cultural

ground of dominant ethnocentric values that have prevailed in the past?"[68]

In addition to the jury system, the size of the Aboriginal writing community poses other problems. As it is a relatively new artistic community, there are few established senior artists within it; therefore finding role models can be difficult. Rebecca Belmore[69], a Thunder Bay performance artist, returned home after spending a fruitless time at the Ontario College of Art. "I quickly became frustrated with the lack of critique for my work. I needed to contextualize myself and my work in a community that could offer discourse."[70]

Belmore's need for context in the growth of her work as a visual artist is parallel to a need for administrators, designers, dramaturgs, technicians and critics in the theatre. A new theatrical support structure is necessary for Native writers to create and present their work. This is not to suggest that Native writers be relegated to the margins, but until Aboriginal writers can create theatre that is not for predominantly non-Native audiences, or realized by predominantly non-Native theatre workers, a fully Native theatre is still only on the horizon.

One aspect of the Native community which is entrenched in the Canadian theatrical landscape is the acting community. As Aboriginal characters have

been present on the Canadian stage longer than Aboriginal writers have been involved, there has been a growing Aboriginal acting community with experience and skills to offer. These actors were the first significant Aboriginal presence in Canadian theatre. Due to the kind of prevalent stereotypes in Aboriginal fictional characters to which King refers ('the dissipated savage, the barbarous savage, and the heroic savage') some of these actors have expressed frustration with some of the roles available to them. Ben Cardinal, Alberta playwright and actor, is not only interested in looking at roles written specifically as Native characters:

> I have had enough of playing Indian chiefs. I want to play lawyers and directors. I am looking for more generic roles - non-traditional parts. I would like to move to a position where the parts are more from mainstream life, like doctors and lawyers. You see Orientals and blacks in these roles, but you never see Native Indians. I want to break that barrier.[71]

Graham Greene, who had significant success in American films such as "Dances With Wolves" and "Thunderheart," was also pleased when he was offered a chance to play someone other than the standard 'Indian' role. Having started his careers in Canada doing plays such as *Crackwalker* and *Jessica*, Green talks of avoiding stereotypes as he lists some of the other 'ethnic' roles he's played, in an interview with Ottawa Citizen movie writer

Noel Taylor: '... an Argentinean club owner, the ghost of a black transvestite and voice-over of a 70-year-old Jewish furniture owner'.[72] It seems significant that whereas in the past of Canadian theatre many Aboriginal characters were played by white actors, actors like Greene are now used for many ethnicities, as if to say that any 'other' in terms of race is interchangeable.

Now that Native writers are becoming more prominent and often choosing to write about Native characters, they have this store of acting talent and expertise on which to draw. This is one way that an established community can help to advance a burgeoning one, and it demonstrates that, just as it has been important to attract Aboriginal actors, it is now necessary to create a similar resource of Aboriginal scholars and critics to interact with that work.

As a white critic, it is sometimes far too easy to say that since there are so few Aboriginal critics available, I am needed to write about this community. Unfortunately, this lack of Aboriginal scholars is due in large part to ways in which Aboriginal people have been discouraged in the past from pursuing formal education. The current lack of Native scholars with graduate degrees in literature (or, indeed, in any subject) is the result of the residential school system, which was not designed to prepare Native children for university. This 'de-education' practice was based on an 1880 amendment to the Indian Act of 1876, and upheld by the Indian Act of 1951, by which "any Indian obtaining an University degree would be automatically enfranchised."

'Enfranchisement', one of the key issues of all Indian Acts and amendments, is a euphemism for loss of Indian Status, and the resulting government financial support which comes with it.[73] This practice amounted to a financial punishment for education which, not suprisingly, discouraged many from pursuing further education.

As infrastructures develop, and more Native people become involved in theatre, the importance of the writer becomes paramount. Hanay Geiogamah comments:

> I am convinced that the Indian playwright is the artist on whose shoulders will ride the weight of the struggle for a continued life for the Indian theatre. It will help enormously if this new generation of writers will develop a business sense as well as public relations skills, the more so if he or she directs a company. Otherwise the group will almost certainly stall and flounder, and the plays will never reach the public. The next line of Indian playwrights must also know every facet of the theatre, must rigorously study techniques, and must generally be prepared to adapt, patch, make and mend at a moment's notice. And the Indian playwright must be willing to go the distance. There are no short cuts. Without good plays there will be no theatre. "[74]

It was not until the 1980's that enough of these 'good' plays began to emerge on the Canadian stage. When Tomson Highway wrote and successfully mounted a production of his *The Rez Sisters*, and later *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, it felt like a 'real' Aboriginal theatre was on the rise. This was Native theatre written by an Aboriginal man, involving a cast of Aboriginal actors and chronicling a week in the life of one Aboriginal community. Finally, this was *the* Aboriginal theatre for which Canadian audiences, with their long fascination with the Native, were looking.

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[21]qtd. in Paula Allen Gunn (ed.), introduction, Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women, (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1989), 1.

[22]Agnes Grant, "Native Drama: A Celebration of Native Culture," Contemporary Issues in Canadian Drama, (Winnipeg, MB: Blizzard Publishing, 1995),104.

[23] Wallace, Robert. Producing Marginality: Theatre and Criticism in Canada, (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishing, 1990),158.

[24] Leonard Peterson, *The Great Hunger* (Toronto: The Book Society of Canada Limited, 1967).

[25]*Esker Mike and His Wife, Agiluk: Scenes from Life in the Mackenzie River Delta*, was first written in 1967 and published in 1969 by The Drama Review (14, Fall, 1969). It was later republished by Talon books in 1973. Its first production was not until 1971 when the **Factory Theatre Lab** in Toronto produced it.

[26] Peterson, 13.

[27]The first production of *The Great Hunger* was staged by **The Arts Theatre** in Toronto in November of 1960, and directed by Leo Orenstein.

[28]Peterson,13.

[29]Jamie Portman, Vancouver Province, 12 April, 1976 as quoted in Canadian Drama and the Critic. L.W. Conely (ed.). (Vancouver: Talonbooks,1987), 65.

[30]James Barber, Vancouver Province, 25 November 1967 as quoted in Canadian Drama and the Critic. L.W. Conely (ed.) (Vancouver: Talonbooks,1987), 58.

[31] Cohen was the Toronto Star's drama critic and Entertainment Editor from 1959 - 65. He continued as their drama critic until his death in 1971.

[32]Nathan Cohen, Toronto Star, 25 November, 1967 as quoted in Canadian Drama and the Critic. L.W. Conely (ed.) (Vancouver: Talonbooks,1987), 44.

[33]Jamie Portman, Vancouver Province, 12 April, 1976 as quoted in Canadian Drama and the Critic, 66.

[34] Margo Kane, personal interview, 29 July, 1994 .
[35] Kane interview.
[36] Grant, 106.
[37] Grant, 106.
[38] Thomas King, Cheryl Calver and Helen Hoy (eds), The Native in Literature, (Toronto: ECW Press, 1987), 8.
[39] Grant, 107.
[40] "Contemporary Native Women Voices in Literature," Native Writers: Canadian Writing, ed. W.H. New (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990). This idea is more thoroughly explored in Leslie Monkman's "A Native Heritage: Images of the Indians in English Canadian Literature" (Toronto: U of T press, 1981).
[41] Lisa Mayo, "Appropriation and the Plastic Shaman: Winnetou's Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City," Canadian Theatre Review 68 (Toronto: U of T Press, Fall 1991) 54.
[42] The poet and Deputy Superintendant General of Indian Affairs from 1913 - 1931, Duncan Campbell Scott provides us with an example of this policy in his quote as recorded in "Verily the White man's ways were the best" by Lisa Salem Wiseman (pg 120 - 142 in Studies in Canadian Literature Volume 21.2. University of New Brunswick Press, 1996)120. "It is the opinion of the writer that our Government will in time reach the end of its responsibility as the Indians progress into civilization and finally disappear as a separate and distinct peoople, not by race extinction but by gradual assimilation with their fellow citizens."
[43] Michael Asch (ed), Aboriginal and Treaty Rights in Canada. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997),34. Federally, Native peoples in Canada were not franchised until 1960, the Inuit not until 1962. Alberta and Quebec didn't implement provincial franchise for Indians until 1965 and 1969 respectively.
[44] Lutz, 2.
[45] W.H. New, "Canadian Native Literature and the Sixties: A Historical and Bibliographical Survey" Canadian Literature (Vancouver: UBC Press, Spring/Summer 1997), 167.
[46] Hartmut Lutz (ed),introduction, Contemporary Challenges: conversations with Canadian Native Authors, (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1991), 180.
[47] Glaap, Albert-Reiner. Margo Kane, Daniel David Moses, Yvette Nolan, Drew Hayden Taylor: Four Native Playwrights in Canada, in Interview, (Dusseldorf: self produced pamphlet, 1994.)
[48] Jordan Wheeler, "Our Own Stories," Canadian Theatre Review 66 (Toronto: U of T Press, Spring 1991), .
[49] Tomson Highway, interview, ed. Lutz, 90,91.
[50] Lutz, 108.
[51] Jeanne Perreault and Sylvia Vance (eds), Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada, (Edmonton: NeWest Publishers, 1990), xvi.
[52] Hanay Geiogamah, "Indian Theatre in the United States: 1991: An Assessment," Canadian Theatre Review 68 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Fall 1991), 12 - 14.
[53] Geiogamah, 12.
[54] Geiogamah, 12.
[55] Wheeler, 11.
[56] Gunn, 3.
[57] Monique Mojica, "Theatrical Diversity on Turtle Island: A Tool Towards the Healing," Canadian Theatre Review 68 (Toronto: U of T Press, Fall 1991), 3.
[58] Jeanne Perreault and Sylvia Vance, xv.
[59] Grant, 103.

[60] Lon Borgerson, "Upisasik Theatre in Our Schools," Canadian Theatre Review 65 (Toronto: U of T Press, Winter 1990), 51.
[61] Marjorie Beaucage, "Strong and Soft: Excerpts from a Conversation with Muriel Miguel," Canadian Theatre Review 68 (Toronto: U of T Press, Fall 1991), 7.
[62] Robin Breon and Brenda Kamino, "Funding for Visible Minorities: A Minority Within a Minority," Canadian Theatre Review 63 (Toronto: U of T Press, Fall 1990), 10.
[63] Breon and Kamino, 11.
[64] Breon and Kamino, 11.
[65] Robert Wallace, Producing Marginality, (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1990), 130.
[66] Breon and Kamino, 14.
[67] Breon and Kamino, 14.
[68] Breon and Kamino, 14.
[69] Rebecca Belmore is an Ojibway visual artist. Her exhibit "Inkwewak ka-ayamiwhat: Means Women Who are Speaking" was featured in an issue of Parallelogramme that reproduced the texts form the 1987 exhibition, "Locations: Feminism, Art, Racism, Région - Writings and Artworks," Parallelogramme, 14.4 (Spring 1989), 10,11.
[70] Rebecca Belmore, "Autonomous Aboriginal High-Tech Teepee Trauma Mama: The Performance Art of Rebecca Belmore," Canadian Theatre Review 68 (Toronto: U of T Press, Fall 1991), 44.
[71] Noel Taylor, Ottawa Citizen 24 February, 1991: D1.
[72] Taylor, D1.
[73] W.H. New, 169.
[74] Geiogamah, 12.

Chapter Two:

Naming Names: Aboriginal Theatre in Canada

> Well, there is one little theatre company here in Toronto in a basement office and in ten years from now there will be three Native theatre companies in Toronto and one in each major city across the country and one in every twentieth reserve. Out of each theatre company will come at least six fantastic writers; ten years from now there will be sixty or seventy major literary artists.[75]
>
> Tomson Highway (1991)

> If in the public and private mind of America Indians as a group are invisible, then Indian women are non-existent.[76]
>
> • Paula Gunn Allen

The 1980's were to see a marked increase in the creation of Native theatre in Canada. With the emergence of playwrights such as Tomson Highway, Floyd Favel, Daniel David Moses and Drew Hayden Taylor, and the presence of their plays on stages across the country, a Native theatre community began to flourish with writing at its centre. However, this growth was for the most part a hidden phenomenon since many of the plays were produced by small theatres. As a result, the mainstream media were not covering it. If this theatre is primarily hidden, how do we 'unhide' it, in effect making the

invisible visible? This chapter is about naming the history of Canadian Native theatre, to witness what has been quietly changing the face of Canadian writing.

One of the strategies employed by writers of colour in Canada has been to name that which they perceive mainstream culture not to see. For example, Jordan Wheeler, in his article "In Our Own Voices", lists the names of Aboriginal people involved in every aspect of the creation of theatre. In some ways, the list becomes a litany of names.

> Along with Billy Merasty, Sophie Merasty, Joy and Tina Keeper, Renae Morriseau, Tantoo Cardinal, Floyd Favel, and Darrell Wildcat, the list of prominent, Aboriginal actors who call the Prairie provinces home includes Margo Kane, Ron Cook, Ben Cardinal, Adam Beach, Bernelda Wheeler, and Tom Jackson.[77]

Making the invisible visible is also a strategy that Djanet Sears, a playwright of African-Canadian background, utilizes in her essay "Naming Names: Black Women Playwrights in Canada." [78] In the text, which discusses the accomplishments and relative invisibility of black women playwrights in Canada, she inserts the names of playwrights with titles of their plays.

This strategy of inserting names at the end of paragraphs, instead of working them in as part of the overall narrative of the piece asks the readers to read the name, but not break their understanding, of the narrative within which

these names are written. By employing this method Sears seems to say she will use any opportunity to get the names of these women out, in fact to make the invisible visible. At the same time Sears reminds us of their invisibility by revealing them to us so we can read them between the lines as it were.

One name that is far from invisible is Tomson Highway, whose work has been the most significant breakthrough for Aboriginal artists in Canadian theatre. Highway, a Native Cree, has had a remarkable impact on Canadian theatre in a relatively short period of time. His first play, *Aria*, a series of monologues, was performed by Makka Kleist at Toronto's Annex Theatre in 1987. These monologues explored aspects of Native womanhood and utilized classical and Cree mythology as well as contemporary urban reality. His next piece, *The Sage, The Dancer and The Fool*, was performed at the Native Canadian Centre in February of 1989 and focused on a day in the life of a young Native man in urban Toronto. However, it was Highway's first full-length play, *The Rez Sisters*, a dark comedy about a group of women living on a reservation on Manitoulin Island, Ontario, which brought Highway enormous success. The play premiered in Toronto in 1986, in a production directed by Larry Lewis. After a successful national tour, a Dora Mavor Moore award for Best New Play, and a nomination for a Chalmers Award, the production traveled to the Edinburgh International Festival in August 1988. At home, the play was short-listed for the Governor General's Literary Award

for Best New Play, published in 1988 and subsequently sold out in a new production at Montreal's Centaur Theatre in January 1989. That same year, Highway's second installment in what is intended to be a trilogy, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, premiered at Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille in April, repeating the local success of its sister play and picking up four more Dora Mavor Moore Awards: Outstanding New Play, Best Production, Best Actor in a Lead Role,[79] and Best Supporting Actress.[80] It later played at the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto in 1991, the first breakthrough into big budget mainstream theatre by a Native Canadian playwright. Highway has not only become a huge influence within the Aboriginal theatre community, but as Denis W. Johnston says, Highway has become "without question, the most important new Canadian playwright to emerge in the latter half of the 1980's."[81]

Highway's leadership has also been crucial to the development of a national Native theatre community. One of the ways he has accomplished this is by founding Native Earth Performing Arts Inc. (N.E.P.A.)(1982) in Toronto, which has a mandate to:

1. Provide a base for professional Native performers, writers, technicians and artists;

2. Encourage the use of theatre as a form of communication within the Native community, including the use of the Native languages;

3. Communicate to our audiences the experiences that are unique to Native people in contemporary society;

4. Contribute to the further development of theatre in Canada.[82]

N.E.P.A. accomplishes these objectives through training actors when necessary, helping new writers from Aboriginal communities to develop their work through a yearly festival titled Weesakeechak Begins To Dance, and by producing a season of work by Aboriginal writers. Highway's leadership has extended to a role as advocate for other Aboriginal writers. In the introduction to *The Rez Sisters*, Highway talks about his hopes for the play: "to make the Rez cool, to show and celebrate what funky folk Canada's Indian people really are."[83] In contrast, in the introduction to *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Highway quotes Lyle Longclaws: "Before the healing can take place, the poison must be exposed."[84]

Jordan Wheeler discusses this idea of poison in talking about the controversial storyline of *Dry Lips...*, which culminates in the rape of a woman with a crucifix by a man born with fetal alcohol syndrome.

> He calls for the rediscovery of the sacred woman in all of us, a woman and land who have been raped, distorted and abused by centuries of exploitation, oppression and victimization. He calls for the rekindling of the spirits that have for so long been the source of fear, confusion, denial and persecution. Yes, he steps harshly on our sensibilities, our

deepest fears and yet he is constantly urging us to turn around and take a second look. In opening the gates of our searing memories, moments of celebration and institutionalized thinking, he ruptures the taken for granted and denies the comfort of escape. In exposing himself and the world as he knows it, Tomson does not offer an idealized vision of how the world could be but rather offers purification through honesty, sharing and contradiction. Only by going through the flood of flames can we find strength.[85]

Other Aboriginal writers have assumed this charge, producing a body of work which is frequently disturbing and personal. Drew Hayden Taylor[86] refers to this in an interview with Albert-Reiner Glaap.

> It's been my experience that the majority of Native plays deal with the hardship and tragedies inflicted on Native people in the last 503 years. As a cathartic process, most Native playwrights are working out these demons through theatre.[87]

Since *The Rez Sisters*, other prominent plays by Aboriginal writers have described reservation life and the effect on its community. Both *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* are set on an imaginary reserve in Ontario and give the audience Highway's impression of reserve life. Floyd Favel's *All My Relations* tells the tale of the troubled transition from the reserve, where there are no jobs, to a refugee existence in the city.

Linda Griffiths and Maria Campbell's *Jessica* covers similar territory as does *fareWell* by Winnipeg's Ian Ross.

It is difficult to surmise whether Native writers are truly interested in mainly writing about reserve life, or if they are responding to the audience which wants to see this similar story told in many ways. The dominance of this particular kind of story is also due in part to Tomson Highway, whose influence on both the theatre community and the way in which work by Aboriginals is perceived cannot be overstated. He writes about reservation life, and he is the most prominent Native playwright, so many use him as a standard. This is not to say that he has espoused any definitive set of guidelines to define Native theatre. Instead, he has been an advocate for other Native writers, as he believes it is only through education that an artistic community, indeed a cultural community, can be (re)born.

> Until we have a generation of Indian people out there who have been inundated with Nanabush[88] stories and incredible literature written by our own people, in their own language, we won't really have our word as a people, as a distinct culture.[89]

When in 1991 Highway spoke optimistically of hopes for an Aboriginal theatre, talking of sixty to seventy major literary artists by 2001, it was with great faith. As we approach the end of this decade, it seems unlikely that his prediction will hold true. Paul Thompson, founding director of Theatre Passe

Murraille, and collaborator with Maria Campbell and Linda Griffiths on *Jessica*, is also confused by what seemed to be a predictable progression towards an established Aboriginal theatre.

> In '82 it seemed totally logical that there would inevitably be a Native theatre company functioning on a perennial basis in Saskatoon. It seemed to be the next step. And if not Saskatoon, certainly Edmonton. Just looking at the experience and the talent that was around and all of the other givens [and] I don't know why that [hasn't] happened.[90]

While neither Highway nor Thompson's vision has been realized, progress is being made. Theatre companies dedicated to the creation of Native theatre have sprung up across the country. While Native Earth Performing Arts was founded in 1982, Vancouver was already home to Spirit Song, established in 1981. Spirit Song started as a youth theatre project and evolved to specialize in theatre arts training. Margo Kane also works in Vancouver with her company Full Circle First Nations Performance. Upisasik Theatre operates out of Ille-la-cross, Saskatchewan. The former Four Winds Theatre has evolved into KEHEWIN, which currently operates out of Calgary, Alberta, and De-Bah-Jeh-Mu-Jig Theatre operates out of West Bay, Manitoulin Island. The most activity, however, continues to be in the West, but is not in Saskatchewan or Alberta, as Thompson predicted. Instead, Manitoba has become a Western centre for new companies interested in work by and for Aboriginal people. In Winnipeg, Awasikan Theatre Inc. is still active and

training actors. More recently, Red Roots Theatre has formed under the artistic directorship of Monica Marx, and has had an ambitious first three seasons. In the first two seasons the company presented two collectively created works: *Those Damn Squaws* and *What Ever Happened to the AJI?*, and *Heart of A Distant Tribe*, a play by recent Governor General Award winner, Ian Ross. One of the province's most recently formed companies, Shakespeare on the Red will begin mounting productions of Shakespeare in the Spring of 1998. Its director Libby Mason, a recent arrival from England, intends to use entirely Aboriginal casts.

The most prominent writers, however, continue to work out of Ontario. Although Highway helped to pave the way towards mainstream theatres, playwrights such as Daniel David Moses and Drew Hayden Taylor have also experienced significant success.

Daniel David Moses is a poet and playwright who writes full-time out of Toronto. His best known plays are *Coyote City*, which was nominated for the 1991 Governor General's Literary Award for Drama, *The Dreaming Beauty*, *Big Buck City* and *Almighty Voice and His Wife*. His most recent play, *The Moon and Dead Indians*, and its companion piece, *Angel of the Medicine Show*, were most recently produced at Theatre Passe Muraille under the title *'The Indian Medicine Shows'*.

Drew Hayden Taylor is both a stage and screen writer and has written and

directed several documentary films. After an early career as a Native Affairs reporter for CBC Radio, he continued to write articles on Native arts and culture for several Canadian periodicals. His plays include *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*, which won a Chalmers Canadian Play Award, *The Bootlegger Blues*, for which he received the Canadian Author's Association Literary Award for Best Drama, as well as *Someday* and *The All Complete Aboriginal Show Extravaganza*. He recently stepped down as Artistic Director of Native Earth after a two-year stay.

Despite all of these successes, however, the companies dedicated to aboriginal theatre continue to languish as some of the poorest in the country. While Highway's prediction for the 90's may have been simply over-exuberant, and the national arts funding crisis an important consideration, there may be another contributing factor: that the bulk of aboriginal theatre writers have been male. Drawing on only half of the population signficantly decreases the potential for achieving the results Highway predicted. There have been two significant movements in the development of an Aboriginal theatre: getting Native characters on stage, in effect making them visible on the Canadian theatrical landscape; and more recently, developing a community of writers. The majority of writing by Aboriginal people for the stage, however, has been by men. Writing in reaction to what she perceived as misogyny in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Marian Botsford Fraser asked in The Globe and Mail, "But I wonder how a Native woman dramatist would tell this tale."[91]

One has to question who that might be. No Aboriginal women playwrights have approached the success of Tomson Highway, Drew Hayden Taylor or Daniel David Moses.

The exceptions to the dominant male voices emerging from Aboriginal theatre have been Margo Kane and Maria Campbell.[92] Each of these women is predominantly known for only one play - Kane for her self-written and performed *Moonlodge*(1990), and Campbell for a piece she co-wrote with Linda Griffiths, titled *Jessica*(1992). Where Kane has chosen to work with many collaborators during the development, touring and redevelopment of her piece, Campbell co-wrote *Jessica* with one other consistent writer. This play, after revisions by Linda Griffiths which reduced Campbell's credit to contributor, went on to win a Dora Mavor Moore Award for Outstanding New play, runner-up for the Chalmers Award, and Best Canadian Production at the Quinzanne International Festival in Quebec City.

Margo Kane came to theatre as an actress and dancer. She had grown tired of what was available to her as an actor:

> I didn't want to be an actor that played every ethnic role possible, I didn't want to be the token Indian and I didn't want to be understudying to some white woman playing an Indian role...the non-Native community hadn't done their community development and I was expected to come in and build their bridges for them and do all

their work for peanuts while they got all of the funding.[93]

Kane turned to writing and directing. Tired of seeing theatre that she perceived as irrelevant, she sought to use performance as a way of expressing herself theatrically with stories that were relevant to her.

> I was not really enthralled with being an actor and always playing roles in other people's productions about what being Native is or being cast in shows that were about lives and histories that I didn't care about. I wanted to share the stories of our communities; there are rich and vital stories there.[94]

She develops her work through an interdisciplinary process, using the performance techniques of storytelling, song and dance. *Moonlodge* was created in this way and was later developed into a written piece. Some of her other performances, although she does not consider them plays in a written sense, are *Reflections in the Medicine Wheel*, *We've Always Been Here*, *Childhood Burial* and *Memories Springing/Waters Singing*. Kane addresses a move away from referring to her own work as 'plays' in an interview with Albert-Reiner Glaap:

> I do not consider the writing that I do, plays, per se. ...I create performances. I write from inspired improvisations in physical theater, sometimes collaging images, texts, slides, video and music together from a variety of sources. Mostly I find the expression is not

written at all.[95]

Her major piece, *Moonlodge*, is unapologetically autobiographical. As a result, Kane has also dealt with the criticism that her play is more therapy than theatre. Kane seems uncomfortable with this delineation between 'art' and 'therapy'.

> I express my feelings as fully as I can, I use my craft to delve as deeply as is possible each time. I want to honestly share what I can and my joy and rage and fear and courage are released. Is that therapy?[96]

The contention about Kane's art seems to be focused on her artistic license with own biography. If she were writing about a non-Native woman on a similar personal journey, I wonder if the same criticisms would apply. By choosing to create a piece of theatre that is inspired by her own life, Kane tells her own story. Although the mandate of telling Canadian stories was a cornerstone in the development of indigenous Canadian theatrical forms in the 1970's, Kane is now discouraged from telling her own as it is *too* personal. This is a frustrating assertion, as Native writers are just beginning to tell their stories on the stage. They must be allowed the same development. Emma LaRoque relates a similar frustration with reaction to her own writing.

> As one of those earlier Native writers, I experienced and studied what may be called the Native-voice/white-audience dynamic. The interactions were often poignant. On another level, we were again

> rendered voiceless no matter how articulate we were. Apparently unable to understand or accept the truth of our experiences and perceptions, many white audiences, journalists, and critics resorted to racist techniques of psychologically labelling and blaming us. We were psychologized as 'bitter,' which was equated with emotional incapacitation, and once thus dismissed, we did not have to be taken seriously.[97]

In "From the Centre of the Circle the Story Emerges" in Canadian Theatre Review, Kane writes about the writing of *Moonlodge* as a kind of journey in itself: 'an attempt to transform feelings and images into written words.'

> In the development of *Moonlodge*, the fact that it was oral storytelling was very important. Without a written script, I told the story over and over, embellishing each character and scene anew every performance. It was a method not without its trauma. I love to improvise, yet I didn't have the trust in myself as yet to think I could really hold an audience for an hour all by myself. Also I have trained in a Western tradition that is very critical of dramatic work and I knew that storytelling did not quite measure up in that tradition. Coupled with my own lack of writing skills, I was fraught with anxiety.[98]

It was an invitation to Weesakeechak Begins To Dance, an annual new play festival at Native Earth Performing Arts, which gave Kane the opportunity to

write the story down.

> In the written version that evolved for the Native Earth production of *Moonlodge* in November 1990 I was still struggling to articulate the story in a full way. Coupled with my inexperience in writing and a new director with a different vision, Floyd Favel, I was unable to feel fully satisfied from within the performance experience. I could feel as an actor that my own natural narrative line was being lost or replaced by a direction that I did not know and therefore trust. Also, being inside the piece, I could not see what the audience was seeing clear[ly] enough and I wondered what story they were getting. Was it mine or was it the many directors and dramaturges who had influenced it?[99]

As a result of these kinds of doubts, Kane chose to keep the text of *Moonlodge* as fluid as possible.[100] In order to maintain this constant state of textual flux Kane workshopped *Moonlodge* with five different directors. Kane was the only constant in this process which has both established her ownership of the theatrical event while allowing for many different voices to have significant input into the show. Two of these workshops were directed by Aboriginal directors: Floyd Favel at first, then later a first-time director who was Aboriginal with whom Kane wanted to work. In each case, Kane invited the director to work with her, so no outside person or body was shaping the nature of the workshop. Her process was to choose a director, perform a series of shows under that direction, then move on to another director if she was no

longer happy with what the show was doing or saying. Kane says "*Moonlodge* has developed over a period of time because I had to work with outside directors. And I didn't trust that they knew what I was trying to say, [I was concerned] that they would impose or presume that this is what I was trying to say."[101]

There are several parallels between the experiences of Margo Kane and Maria Campbell. While Kane is principally known for her single piece *Moonlodge*, Campbell has never received the same attention as she gained for her work with Linda Griffiths on *Jessica*. Both plays are intensely personal, rooted in the playwrights' own lives. Both of these playwrights have had significant national exposure, yet neither has followed up her success with other noteworthy plays. It may not be a coincidence that neither of these writers chose to relocate to Toronto, a seeming key to success as a writer within the Aboriginal community,[102] if not the broader theatrical community.

Just as Kane's *Moonlodge* is autobiographical, Campbell's *Jessica* is based on her autobiographical novel Halfbreed. *Jessica* was meant to continue where Halfbreed had left off. Although maintaining control over their plays was an issue for both of these women, their different circumstances demanded different solutions.

Even with her previous success as a novelist with little training, Campbell felt she needed the guidance that an experienced white collaborator could

offer her in writing for the theatre. A production directed by Clarke Rogers moved Campbell to want to write for the theatre:

> I didn't know much about theatre, but I was doing community work when I saw *Almighty Voice*. I went to the play because the Native community was in an uproar. It was a play about Native people done by whites; it also delved into the spiritual world that we felt should be interpreted by Natives themselves. I went to denounce it, and ended up defending it. In that production of *Almighty Voice* I saw something really powerful happen, something that educated, that healed, that empowered people; it was fun and it was magical. ...I was desperate for skills and tools to help make change. I started going to libraries finding books that were about theatre. I and several other women tried to write a play using these books as a guideline. It didn't work. [103]

The three people involved in this process were Paul Thompson as director, Griffiths as actor and co-writer, and Maria Campbell, whose novel and life inspired the play. As a result of The Book of Jessica, edited by Linda Griffiths, this process is one of the most closely recorded workshop relationships we have of this kind.

The development process for *Jessica* was integral to the end product. The workshop was driven by a process usually identified with Thompson. This process, which had in an earlier form developed the influential *The Farm*

Show, has come to be associated with workshopping ideas and people - both the people involved in the production, and the subjects of the show. In this case Maria Campbell was the constant for both of these. The co-writer status shared by Campbell and Griffiths caused the whole process to be one in which relationships as well as content were being workshopped. By this I suggest that not only were the guidelines of how the play was to evolve set by the process, but also how each of the three main players in the process would work with each other. One of the most interesting aspects of The Book of Jessica is that it asks theatre practitioners to question the process of workshopping itself. This text raises significant questions about cultural appropriation, voices of authenticity, and the possibilities/impossibilities for 'sharing' cross-culturally. Paul Thompson, the workshop director, admits that the lines can be blurry: "It's a messy business doing collectives; the messiest part has to do with ownership. I think when you are starting to deal with relationship of cultural material and personal material you get even more complicated."[104]

Griffiths, disturbed by the collaboration and confused about issues around ownership, started the Book of Jessica in an effort to reconcile her feelings about the project and her relationship with Campbell. "Everytime I'd go at all the Native stuff I'd be cringing inside. To have the 'subject' in the room, plus, they're Native and I'm white as the driven snow, the clouds on the prairie."[105]

As a result, where Kane had resisted fixing her text, Campbell's became fixed by her co-writer when it was published in The Book of Jessica in 1989. One need only read resource books such as All My Relations: Sharing Native Values Through the Arts,[106] where you can find Campbell quoted throughout as a kind of master, to understand the impact that her experience in Canadian theatre has had on many developing Aboriginal artists. Given that *Jessica* is the only play of Campbell's to be published, and only the second full play with which she was involved in the writing,[107] this is a significant impression. It demonstrates the hunger for Native women mentors in the theatre.

Unfortunately the other common path of both Campbell and Kane is that they have both chosen to leave playwriting for the time being. Their names are present in Canadian theatre because of their past contributions. Whereas Kane has begun to focus on directing and developing other talent in her company Full Circle First Nations Performance in Vancouver, Campbell has almost completely left the theatre. No women have taken their place, but whoever is on the way must contend with the weight of Campbell and Kane's experiences. In challenging the ways in which theatre is created, they have both made significant contributions, but it is clear that their experiences influenced their decisions to move away from text-based work. Currently there is no woman with the kind of profile that Kane and Campbell had at the height of their playwriting careers.

Yvette Nolan in *Annie Mae's Movement*:

> *FBI Guy has entered and is watching her. She becomes aware of him. As he approaches her, her "don'ts" become more agitated, pleading, angry, anguished. As he rapes her, she stops begging and begins to say:*
>
> My name is Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Micmac Nation from Shubenacadie Nova Scotia. My mother is Mary Ellen Pictou, my father is Francis Thomas Levi, my sisters are Rebecca Julien and Mary Lafford, my brother is Francis. My daughters are Denise and Deborah. You cannot kill us all. You can kill me, but my sisters live, my daughters live. You cannot kill us all. My sisters live. Becky and Mary, Helen and Priscilla, Janet and Raven, Sylvia, Ellen, Pelajia, Agnes, Monica, Edie, Jessica, Gloria and Lisa and Muriel, Monique, Joy and Tina, Margo, Maria, Beatrice, April, Colleen...
>
> You can kill me but you cannot kill us all. You can kill me.
>
> FBI Guy pulls out a handgun and shoots her behind the right ear. She falls on her left side, drawing her knees up slightly. He exits.[108]

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[75]Bryan Loucks, "Another Glimpse: Excerpts from a Conversation with Tomson Highway," Canadian Theatre Review 68 (Toronto: U of T Press, Fall 1991),10.
[76] Gunn, 9.
[77]Wheeler, 8.
[78] Rita Much (ed.), Women on the Canadian Stage: The Legacy of Hrotsvit, (Winnipeg: Blizzard Publishing, 1992), 91.
[79] Graham Green received this award. At the time he was also nominated for an Academy Award for his part in Kevin Costner's Hollywood film "Dances with Wolves."

[80] Doris Linklater, an actress who had also been in *The Rez Sisters*, won this award.
[81] Denis W. Johnston, "Lines and Circles: The 'Rez' Plays of Tomson Highway," Native Canadian Writers and Canadian Writing. ed. W.H. New (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990), 254.
[82] Mandate statement, (Toronto: Native Earth Performing Arts Inc., 1982).
[83] Tomson Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishing, 1988)
[84] Tomson Highway, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*., (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1989)
[85] Wheeler, 19.
[86] It is worth noting that Drew Hayden Taylor considers himself to be an exception to this, choosing to focus on comedic drama. There will be further discussion of Taylor in this chapter.
[87] Albert-Reiner Glaap, 13.
[88] In his introduction to *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* Highway explains Nanabush in this way: "Trickster is as pivotal and important a figure in our world as Christ is in the realm of Christian mythology. 'Weesageechak' in Cree, 'Nanabush' in Ojibway, 'Raven' in others, 'Coyote' in still others, this Trickster goes by many names and many guises. In fact, he can assume any guise he chooses. Essentially a comic, clownish sort of character, his role is to teach us about the nature and the meaning of existence on the planet Earth; he straddles the consciousness of man and that of God, the Great Spirit." (Pg. xiii.)
[89] Loucks, 9.
[90] Paul Thompson, personal interview, 29 September, 1994.
[91] Marian Botsford Fraser "Cross Current" The Globe and Mail 17 April, 1991: C1.
[92] Other Native women playwrights with less prominence on the national theatre scene include Tina Mason, Monique Mojiica, and Sharon Shorty.
[93] Kane interview.
[94] Kane interview.
[95] Glaap, 10.
[96] Margo Kane, "From the Centre of the Circle the Story Emerges," Canadian Theatre Review 68 (Toronto: U of T Press, Fall 1991), 27.
[97] Perreault and Vance, xvi.
[98] Kane in CTR, 27.
[99] Kane in CTR, 27.
[100] When I met with Kane *Moonlodge* had already been published in Canadian Native Literature but she did not consider this to be the final version and was considering publishing it with Playwrights Union of Canada with a different version of the text.
[101] Kane interview.
[102] Paul Thompson refers to this in my interview with him. "Saskatoon was always a great place for us to do things. We'd always had a terrific report with the place since *If you're so good why do you live in Saskatoon*. Although the natural gravity of the major cities fucked it a bit ... There's still that sense of inevitability, that sense of exploitation."
[103]Linda Griffiths and Maria Campbell, The Book of Jessica: A Theatrical Transformation (Toronto: Couch House Press, 1989), 16. This book has essentially two separate sections. One section is the play and the other is a series of discussions between Campbell and Griffiths. For the purposes of this I will only be excerpting from the conversations between the two writers.
[104]Thompson interview.
[105]Griffiths and Campbell, 33.
[106] Catherine Verall (ed.), All My Relations: Sharing Native Values Through the Arts, (Saskatoon: Canadian Alliance in Solidarity with Native peoples, 1988), 3.
[107] Maria Campbell co-wrote a second play with Metis activist Harry Daniels. *One more time* was produced by Saskatoon's **Twenty-Fifth Street Theatre Centre** in 1995.

[108] Helen Thundercloud, Priscilla Lavasseur, Sylvia Maracle, Pelajia Highway, Agnes Grant, Monica Marx, Gloria Miguel, Lisa Mayo, Muriel Miguel, Monique Mojica, Joy Keeper, Tina Keeper, Margo Kane, Maria Campbell, Beatrice Culleton, April Raintree, Colleen Cutschall,

Chapter Three:

Colonizing and Yvette Nolan: The Making of An Aboriginal Playwright[109]

> "I breathed her in without thinking."[110] Linda Griffiths on Maria Campbell, her partner in the creation of *Jessica*

> "...but no, they wanted her to be a Native woman because I'm supposed to be a Native woman....They were very, very angry. I was supposed to be writing one way and I wasn't fulfilling their expectations of that." [111] Yvette Nolan on reaction to the character of Angela in *Blade*.

The stormy collaboration between Linda Griffiths and Maria Campbell on the award–winning play *Jessica* has helped to frame an ongoing discussion about cultural 'boundaries' and potential 'trespassing' in Canadian theatre. In looking for models to help my work with Yvette Nolan, this is one of the few relevant examples I found. For those Canadian artists whose work attempts to bridge the gap between cultures, it is a reminder

of the potential dangers and fruits of intercultural work.

In collaborating on a theatrical piece about Campbell's life, Griffiths and Campbell found themselves enacting the very struggle for a meeting-ground between the Aboriginal and white communities that they were trying to represent. Their work asks whether, in the light of increasing amounts of intercultural work, we need new models for this work between cultures. The Book of Jessica, which is made up of a collection of interviews and discussions between Campbell and Griffiths, with the playtext accompanying it, is the result of the efforts to resolve the conflicts surrounding the project. It raises significant questions about the possibilities for appropriation when the mainstream documents 'Aboriginal experience'.

The project caused Linda Griffiths, a white actor developing and playing the role of a Metis woman, community worker and activist based on Campbell's life, to come to terms with her own position within Canadian society. Joanne Tompkins describes this 'middle' position in her reading of The Book of Jessica as:

> ... being the colonized, as a Canadian, not really knowing who she is, and by implication, being responsible for the horrific things that

happened to Campbell and her people. [112]

To propose that Griffiths is both the colonized and the colonizer, as potential appropriator of the story of Maria Campbell, is to recognize the complexities of this issue for a Canadian theatre community that is now beginning to see greater participation by Aboriginal people.

My first look at The Book of Jessica left me feeling assured of my own superiority to Griffiths. It seemed obvious to me where Griffiths had gone wrong. This was clearly a case of appropriation of Campbell's voice and story – or so it seemed. Although I still believe this to be partially true, the alternatives to appropriation have recently become less clear for me. As Griffiths narrated her theatrical and emotional journey through the book and the anger that she felt about becoming the 'other'[113] in a cultural relationship that was usually the reverse, I was forced to reevaluate my own approach to scholarship and research.

While working in Winnipeg's theatre community, then studying at the University of Alberta, I became increasingly interested in the work of Yvette Nolan. Kevin Prokosh, who writes on the Arts for the Winnipeg Free Press, hailed her in 1993 as "... one of the most exciting playwrights to watch."[114] I was watching but in a particular way - by "particular" I suggest

that I was watching for particular things: specifically how she wrote *differently* about gender and race. My expectation of difference had everything to do with her race. I had fallen into a trap of looking for her 'Nativeness' only to discover that Yvette Nolan is not a woman who writes predominantly about Aboriginal issues.

Blade, Nolan's first play, was produced at the 1990 Winnipeg Fringe Festival. It became one of the hits of the festival, and was held over at a 'Best of the Fringe' event. The play is told from the viewpoint of Angela, a young woman who has been murdered. In introducing herself she says "Yeah...I'm not really here. I'm actually just sort of an after–image, you know? Like when you turn off your TV, and you can still see the picture there for a split second. Well, this is a split–second, for me." [115]

The "powers that be"[116] have let Angela return, for reasons of which the audience is not immediately aware. The rest of the one–act play shows Angela watching as her family and friends deal with her murder. The media connect the story of Angela's murder to a string of 'hooker murders' and her reputation is sealed:

> And of course, they made me out to be a prostitute. The media coverage was full of denials. The police said there was no evidence

that I was a prostitute, classmates they interviewed said they had no idea I was hooking for a living, my boss at work flat out denied that I could possibly be a prostitute but nothing works like denial, does it? [117]

Through subtle changes to her costume as the play progresses, Angela gradually 'becomes' the image that the media have created through their rewriting of her story. The 'after–image' is altered to fit the image that has been constructed by the media. This theme of a public revision of the individual's experience has run a parallel course in Nolan's professional life as well.

In January 1992, the Women in View Festival commissioned Nolan and her cast to remount *Blade*.[118] At the Festival Nolan became the focus of a heated debate about Native voice(s), and about the responsibility that writers from underrepresented groups have to the rest of their cultural community. In applying to the festival, Nolan submitted her script, with interesting results. Not only was she accepted and brought to the festival, but in drawing up the program, the organizers of the festival mistakenly described the play as being about a young Native girl who is murdered by a 'hooker killer'.[119] Audience members came to the play expecting to see a

Native woman on stage but instead found a very blond, very white Maria Lamont in the lead role of Angela.

> ...two or three scenes into the play people started getting very anxious because this was obviously not a Native woman. You could feel it in the audience. The performers could feel it and I could feel it... It was like the only reason they came to see the play was because they were going to see some Native woman victimized.[120]

After the performance a discussion ensued in which audience members asked why Nolan had not cast the play with an Aboriginal woman in the lead role. Upon explaining that the role had not been intended for an Aboriginal woman, the reaction was swift and judgmental. "...they wanted to know why, as a Native woman, I didn't write about Native women. They were very, very angry. I was supposed to be writing one way and I wasn't fulfilling their expectations of that."[121]

The organizers assumed that Nolan would write about Aboriginal women because of her race, which is to assume that her voice is that of an Aboriginal woman. The potential for misunderstanding here is especially acute when talking about people of the Metis community. The position of

Metis people in Canadian society can be a tenuous one, as Maria Campbell describes:

> We are children of two peoples who wanted something of each other. And when they started to hate each other, they focused that hate on us, their children, until we were just like a band of gypsies moving around, landless, carrying the few things that they had cast off – a little bit of a language, a little bit of culture. [122]

As the definition of 'Metis' is continually debated in and out of the Metis community, Nolan's designation as a Metis person also becomes questionable. Metis, traditionally meant to describe the descendant of one French parent and one Aboriginal parent, is now generally accepted to mean the offspring of any mixed parentage which includes one who is Aboriginal.[123] However, the definition continues to be contentious. For all these reasons, it seems problematic to label this playwright and expect her to fulfill certain purposes in her plays that will help to explain the Aboriginal community to her white audiences.[124] However, her experience at the Women in View festival reminds us that playwrights from underrepresented groups are expected to fulfill the responsibility of presenting their communities on stage. The question for Nolan seems to

be which community she is expected to represent.

Nolan's experience as 'Native representative' was not limited to the Women in View festival. Since then, discussion of her work has often centred around her race. Traces of reluctance on her part to assume the role of 'Native playwright' can be found in her own questions about how she fits in. Nolan holds the position of cultural straddler with an uneasy stance. "I'm never enough either. As a Metis I'm never Indian enough for the Indian community and I'm never white enough for the white community. I stand in both worlds. Or both communities try to claim me at the same moment."[125]

Reluctantly, Nolan struggles with finding a balance between recognizing her heritage and her own personal history. How does a kid from middle-class Winnipeg speak for a group of people with both a diverse history and current reality? Is she any less authentic than someone who grew up on a reserve? Having grown up in a country where a form of segregation is maintained through the reserve system, and having been raised by an Aboriginal mother and Irish-Canadian father, Nolan is a woman who defies the separation of the two. To be Metis is to belong to neither group completely. The multi-faceted conflict within Nolan's identity finds its

debate within her plays.

At the opening of *Blade*, Angela, a white woman, tells the story of a classmate's murder. Cindy Bear, an Aboriginal woman, is assumed to have been murdered by the 'hooker–killer' who has recently killed several young Aboriginal women.

> ...when Cindy Bear got killed by the hooker–killer, some people at school said "Oh, I never knew she was a prostitute – I never would have guessed" and others said "I always thought she was a whore – where else would she get the money to go to school? They usually are, you know. [126]

With the recounting of Cindy Bear's murder at the beginning of the play, the audience can easily believe that the story is about Cindy Bear. Instead, Angela begins to narrate the hour before her own death to the point at which a man pulls up in a car and offers to give her a ride home. In the subsequent action, the audience sees Angela's murder. It is not until this point that they become aware that they have been listening to Angela's ghost. With this shift, the story becomes about Angela's murder and subsequent trial by the media. From the beginning of the play, the question of whose story is to be told is central. Throughout the action of

the play, Angela's ghost seeks to redeem her after her death, and because the deaths have been paralleled at the beginning of the play, we as audience are given a chance to 'look' at Cindy Bear's death again. There are many things going on in this play, not the least of which is the question of why the murder of prostitutes is seen somehow as a lesser crime. For the purposes of this discussion, however, I would like to focus on the tension between white and Aboriginal voices.

In *Blade*, Cindy Bear is given no voice. We hear about her from Angela. We meet Angela's best friend, mother, boyfriend, and murderer, but we are only told about Cindy Bear from a person who barely knew her. Angela is allowed to revisit us from the dead but Cindy Bear remains an invisible face and mute voice. Angela narrates the story of Cindy Bear's death and, through their suggested parallel, of her implied after-life. The silence of the Aboriginal woman in *Blade* suggests many things. The tension that exists between the white woman who is given a voice, and the Aboriginal woman who is interpreted through another, is one that exemplifies the issues surrounding Nolan's career to this point. If to be Metis is to be half white and half Aboriginal, then Nolan has chosen to let the white woman speak in this play.

Ironically, Angela's chance for redemption through a local social affairs columnist is usurped by breaking news in the J.J. Harper case. To a Manitoba audience, this event in the play is a page from recent history. Harper, a prominent Aboriginal man in Manitoba, had been shot by a white police officer in March of 1988. Questions surrounding the shooting of Harper and the handling of other cases involving Aboriginals finally led to the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry(AJI).[127] The AJI marked the first formal inquiry into the relationship between the Manitoba police, justice system and Aboriginal community. For the Aboriginal community in Winnipeg, the Inquiry confirmed that racism in the police and the justice system was finally being acknowledged.

In *Blade*, the replacement of Angela's story with Harper's resonates in several ways. It took Harper's murder for the AJI to be formed, although there had been another well-known, and equally suspicious, case of an Aboriginal woman's murder which had been covered up for over twenty years.[128] With Harper's replacing Angela's story in the news, we are again reminded of Cindy Bear. Cindy Bear's death is overlooked and summed up by stereotypes about what Native women 'must' be; that is, prostitutes. Questions around the Harper case started to look at the stereotypes of what

Native men 'must' be (stumbling drunks). In choosing to have the audience reminded of Harper at this point in the play, Nolan accomplishes two things. She cues the memory of existing racial tension between Aboriginals and whites, and the reminder that as truth has arisen, the stories around their deaths have had surprising revisions. With Angela's last chance for redemption in the media scuttled, her murderer is found hanging in his cell, "sealing [her] fate and Cindy Bear's for ever",[129] since there is now no way that the 'truth' can be revealed.

Through this kind of analysis I do what I find most dangerous. Instead of accepting Nolan's frustration at being categorized and labelled as a woman who writes first from a position of 'other', I look for clues within her work that point to her commentary on racial identity. To speak of Nolan as an Aboriginal playwright, and introduce her plays as being about Aboriginal issues alone, is to do a disservice to the playwright. By taking the position of definer in relation to the defined, I, the scholar, have made an unavoidably colonizing move: one which allows me (white academic and dramaturg), to interpret the works of Yvette Nolan (unintelligible to white ears Native woman). It also runs the danger of turning her into a cultural informant.

In talking about authenticity of voice, Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak raises the problem with which many writers of minority groups are faced– the tension between being asked to speak on behalf of a group of people, and the knowledge that by taking on this role of 'Native informant' some risk nullifying the need for the hegemony to invite more voices of minorities to enter into the dialogue:

> ...when you are perceived as a token, you are also silenced in a certain way because [...] if you have been brought there it has been covered, they needn't worry about it anymore, you salve their consciences. [130]

Spivak's discussion mainly speaks of the 'Native informant' as a representative of an immigrant group. At this point it becomes necessary to draw parallels between the treatment of immigrant groups and the indigenous people of Canada. Canadian Aboriginals are treated as outsiders in a continent which they settled long before the Europeans. The same racism that affects people who have recently immigrated to Canada is used as a weapon against people who have been here for tens of thousands of years. As the dominant culture (which is predominantly white) becomes more and more alienated from the demographically

mixed population, the need for Native informants is developed. It is difficult to see a member of the academic community as outside of the dominant culture. Does this mean that my writing about Nolan could have some role in perpetuating Native informancy? At what point does interpreting the story of another constitute a colonizing act? Does scholarship run the same risk as performed representation? Existing structures in scholarship and documentary performance styles such as *Jessica* require a fixed power relationship in which one is the interpreter and the other the interpreted. If it is scholarship's duty to look at the implications of such relationships, at what point does this power differential mean that the academic should stay out of this process so as not to reassert her domination?

Spivak's assertion of responsibility is both freeing and intimidating at the same time. Instead of letting the white academic off the hook for delving into issues of what concerns 'other' cultures, Spivak asks those academics who belong to overrepresented groups to look at the ways in which they too have been categorized, and how their own subjection to categorization changes their relationship to issues of race. For example, I tend to think of myself as a representative of a *non*–race. I found myself fighting against

yet recognizing the ideas that Linda Kintz names in her article on Adrienne Kennedy's *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* when she proposes:

> An aesthetic disposition in post–structuralism still often means that the privilege of indifference is available to critics for whom gender remains a marker of femininity, not masculinity, and race a marker of the non–white, not the white. [131]

However, even as I turned to Spivak as a kind of informant on the whole issue of Native informancy, I found no answers as to where this left me. Where do my responsibilities lie as a white academic commenting on the work of an Aboriginal woman? I not only found encouragement but a sense of expectation.

> It is not a solution, the idea of the disenfranchised speaking for themselves, or the radical critics speaking for them; this question of representation, self–representation, representing others, is a problem. On the other hand, we cannot put it under the carpet with demands for authentic voices; we have to remind ourselves that, as we do this, we might be compounding the problem even as we are

trying to solve it. [132]

When looking at myself in relation to race I continue to articulate myself in terms of what I am not. (I am not Native, not black, not East Indian.) In being able to identify myself in terms of what I am not, a power dynamic comes into play. Being white retains its dominance while everything else remains as 'other'. My sense of this was heightened recently as I looked at the way in which my 'discovery' of Nolan enacts an old model of superiority. However, in the way in which I was writing about her I was framing what she did. Nolan has written about a white woman getting murdered, a white woman having a miscarriage, three white women dealing with infidelity, and a white man's campaign against violence against women. Somewhere along the way I had decided that because she was Metis I had to highlight the 'Aboriginal' content in her plays. As with Angela's transformation into prostitute, Nolan threatens to become that which we assume her to be.

This is not to suggest that ignoring race is the answer. Regardless of her ethnicity, Nolan is constantly writing about race in the same way that we all write about race or class, usually without realizing, or acknowledging it. To write about race is not the sole responsibility of the 'other,' any more

than race is the sole category of the non-white. It is interesting how race is 'played out' in Nolan's work, so I, as the scholar need to find a way to comment on race from within Nolan's plays without creating a false context within which to evaluate her (i.e., she is an Aboriginal woman, therefore she must be writing about race). In looking at this Metis woman, who, to this point in her career, has written most often about white women, why has the race of her main characters so often been white? It is possible that this is the identity with which she is most comfortable. Although issues of race are an important part of Nolan's work, it seems more important to her to deal with gender. Nolan's life experience as a light-skinned Aboriginal may have led to her being treated as a white woman. White women's experience of oppression is usually related to their gender as opposed to race, which could offer a partial explanation for Nolan's tendency to foreground gender. In her early plays – *Blade, Job's Wife, Smaller* (unpublished), and *Child*[133] – a woman is at the centre of the action. In the first three, race is not specified. In each of the first productions of these works, all directed by Nolan, white actors assumed the roles. Although in *Smaller* the race of the protagonist is not central to the action, it is in *Blade* and *Job's Wife*. Although aboriginality is an issue in *Blade* and *Job's Wife*, Nolan has placed an Aboriginal woman on the

stage for the first time with *Child*.

Given this context, there are a number of provocative dramatic images that Nolan presents which reflect the tension in her own identity. The problem is that by pegging this playwright at such an early stage in her career I run the risk of shaping its direction by influencing the way the work is received. The power with which I create the context for reading and watching Nolan's work is naturally overestimated here, but it is the potential for influence that I find interesting. These conflicts point to the need for a new model for both performance and scholarship of an intercultural nature – one that allows for broader participation and interaction.

What does the tension between Nolan's written plays and my scholarship create? In our case there are certain other realities that affect the work. Nolan is not a distant subject, nor I an objective academic. I often read Nolan's plays with her at public readings. I performed *Child* in Australia with her. We often discuss aesthetics and politics with each other. We debrief and discuss both our own writing and work around us, and this artistic relationship is based on a strong sense of trust. Nolan's work is affected by my writing and mine by hers. As a result, I am already a

participant. My departure from the relationship would also affect the work. Yet I am confronted by her efforts to explore the tensions of her own identity. It is in one of Nolan's lesser-known pieces that this tension between the threat of co-option, and the desire for community, is dramatized.

Child is a short piece for two women, one Aboriginal and one white. In performance, they share the storytelling role in a manner that Nolan's stage directions describe as being "... not aware of each other, but their stories take up from each other effortlessly, as if they were"[134]. The story they tell is of a little girl who is raped by her brother when visiting the 'rez' and the resulting reaction of a woman who hears of the incident. Monica, the now-grown Native woman in the piece, is the little girl of the story. Monique, the white woman, is the one who hears and reacts to the story.

Although *Child* has been performed twice, its debut was at a Manitoba Association of Playwrights' Reading where Nolan read several of her pieces. The image of this Metis woman reading a piece, dedicated to her mother, about two women of historically conflicting backgrounds attempting to find a middle ground, was a moving spectacle of interculturalism.

Its second presentation was at the 3rd International Women's Playwright's Conference in Adelaide, Australia. It was rehearsed and performed as part of a play marathon on the final weekend of this ten-day event. As a friend and co-Canadian representative to the conference, I performed with Nolan. I again found it to be a moving experience, but soon after, the performance was faced with a difficult situation.

Fifteen minutes after this performance of *Child*, I found Nolan fielding sympathetic comments from a group of women around her. They were playwrights, producers and consumers. They were congratulating her on her bravery, honesty and vulnerability in writing and performing the piece. Many were very moved and concerned for Nolan. I was used to writers being congratulated on their skill and celebrated for their writing, but I was surprised at these comments. When I talked to Nolan later, it became clear that the call of bravery sprang from the assumption that *Child* was based on her own experience of sexual abuse. Although she was expected to write a play about Aboriginal people, when she did this, the audience regarded it as docudrama. It seems that as a minority voice, Nolan is assumed to be speaking the 'truth' - *her* own personal reality - whereas the majority voice is still allowed the leniency of fiction and

telling 'other' people's stories.

In *Child*, although the two characters are unaware of each other's physical presence on stage, there is a metaphysical connection that is cultivated throughout. In style it is overtly narratival, and is all spoken in the past tense. The similarity of the names – Monica and Monique – marks the beginning of the parallels drawn between the two. Monique describes Monica's name as "like my name ... but different." This comments on their entire relationship. The allowance for difference with similarity proposes that connection is possible, and perhaps even necessary, for empowerment. There are several factors working against a union of this kind. Monica's experience is as a child, while Monique's was as an adult. We know little of Monique's life, while Monica describes a life full of "problems" as early as her first speech: "There were all kinds of problems within the family, there was alcohol abuse, and other substance abuse, and – oh all kinds of abuse. So my family broke up."

I propose that for most mainstream audiences, the above speech takes on a metaphorical significance in terms of the Aboriginal community. The audience is not allowed to hear the same background information about Monique. If we extend the metaphor, it is as if Monique's past experience

does not need explaining, as it is 'ours'. What we learn about Monique is in relation to her reaction to the story and her subsequent actions. I find this both interesting and problematic. With Monique as a somewhat anonymous character in light of Monica's revealed experience, there is the danger of creating a hero to the wronged victim. Although this is certainly possible, it seems that the audience is also asked if 'staying out' is a valid alternative. The play presents the impression of being about Monica – her attack and subsequent 'recovery'- but Monique is more than a passive narrator. The audience's experience is tailored to be seen through the eyes of Monique, in that our hearing of the story is structured to match her own past reception of that same story.

The play begins with Monica and Monique telling the story of Monica's young life with Monica as 'I' and Monique referring to 'the little girl'. In her retelling of Monica's story, Monique begins to weave herself into the play's action. "When I heard this story, it was my friend Irene who told me, and I think the horror of it was just destroying her, she's Aboriginal too, and she really had to tell someone..."

In turn, we as observers in the theatre become the audience that Monique has to tell. We are split in our experience of Monica's story, as Monique

breaks from the linear retelling to stop both her (in the past) and our (in the present) hearing of the story. The suspense that Monique felt is related to us:

> ...I think it was poisoning, [Irene] but when she was telling me, I jumped in and said "Is the child dead?" because I couldn't stand waiting to see where the story was going, what this thing was that was eating up Irene and I thought that would be the worst thing that could happen.

Although a sense of anticipation has been created in the dual storytelling up to this point, this passage can serve to jump-start the audience's fears. It has all started fairly innocently. Or has it? The beginning passages tell of Monica getting ready to go to the reservation with explanations as to why, and comments about the weather on the day. Nolan leads her audience to Monique's state of tension as Monica is led closer to the rape. It is with her preparations for visiting the reservation that we are given more hints about the ominous nature of her visit: "So off we went to the rez. It was winter, I remember, it was cold, raw, wicked." With these lines and Monica's introduction to her broken family the reservation has gained a 'reputation' within the play. This, combined with most

audiences' stereotypes about reservations, serves to bring us to the revelation of the event. It is at this point that the speech pattern changes from long descriptive passages to short and choppy statements. Just as Monique and Monica matched each other length of in speeches at the beginning of the piece, they continue to speak in matched sentences. A mirror effect is created – as if to suggest they are the two halves of a whole. This effect is especially apparent as they deliver lines that are almost the same.

Monique: And –

Monica: And.

Monique: And the brother of this child– raped her.

Monica: He raped me.

Monique: Raped her.

Monica: Raped me.

Monique: She was four years old.

Monica: Four years old.

Monique: Only four.

Monica: Only four.

There are several issues at play in *Child,* but for the purposes of this thesis,

I will focus on the possibility and necessity for connection between two women of different experiences and cultures.

There are many ways in which the characters differ. Monique is an adult in the story they tell; Monica is the child, though they are now both grown. Monique is white; Monica is Native. However, both are women, and Nolan brings her audience back to looking at race through a gendered frame. It is on this ground that Monique becomes part of the story. Until the story of the rape is told, Monique's voice is one of 'objective' narrator. She speaks with the voice of white privilege:

> But the grandparents of this little girl were very aware of the effects of disassociation, of disenfranchisement of their people, and they didn't want to propagate this in any way...

Monique remains an observer to the story until the rape is related. We then see her transformation into active participant but with an initial inability to act, due to her own 'difference'. It is here that *Child* is reminiscent of the difficult passages of Griffiths' and Campbell's journey with *Jessica*. However, this is also where the differences between the two situations differ: this 'contract' is reached on a basis of mutual need. Monique's need to help to assuage her own pain, and to help in Monica's,

leads her to try to reach out. In an effort to help, Monique prays to a god. "...and I thought, will God intervene? why would he if he let it happen in the first place?" For Canadian Aboriginals, the Christian church has long been a powerful force. In assisting the Canadian government in their goal of assimilation during the history of the residential schools, the Catholic Church, for one, forbade traditional Native languages and religions and removed Native children from their homes so that they would become completely immersed in Catholic culture. In calling to a singular God, Monica separates herself from Monique (yet, when in *Job's Wife* the character of Grace prays to a God to save her unborn half-breed child, she is answered in person by a Native God whom she was not expecting). As Monique prays to God, it is interesting to question whether an answer would come in the form of a Native god to save the little girl. However, in *Child*, it is the white woman who is able to 'save' Monica – not a God of another sex or denomination. It is this empowerment that the white woman is able to send to the little girl that changes Monica's feelings of shame. They both receive/ utilize their power in bed, which is particularly significant, as the inciting action is a rape. Much of the language used in *Child* is reminiscent of a kind of invasion, yet Nolan offers another model on which this 'invasion' can occur– one in which

both parties are in need. It is this model of friendship that offers approaches both to intercultural performance and to scholarship. Monique slowly becomes more and more involved in the retelling of this story and in her connection to the little girl. Monique reaches out to the girl, wanting to help, but is left feeling that she has been unable to do so. It is Monique's energy that helps the little girl deal with her emotional pain. "...and I thought if only I could send myself out, if only I could go to comfort that child and I concentrated very hard, and I sent myself out into the air, out of my room and into the night..."

Monica describes "this warm feeling, this light... filling me up, pushing out the blackness, pushing out the hurt," but as if to parallel Monique's doubt of her success, it subsides to leave a "tiny flickering light". Through *Child*, Nolan seems to challenge the separation of the women – in fact it is their link that renews Monica. This healing is not a one-way action either. By her action, Monique is able to be healed as well. Her pain in feeling she is unable to assist is alleviated.

With *Child*, I find a potential marriage of ideas in Nolan. Nolan offers an alternative to colonization by interaction across potential cultural barriers. Her model is based on mutual desire and need – a model that could also

be considered as the basis for friendship. The relationship between Nolan and me has also created a new kind of culture - one of work and friendship. This is our own model; one in which the invitation is mutual, and, to this point, fruitful.

In Monica and Monique, we are given two women who define the split in the identity of Nolan. It is this split that makes her difficult to categorize. In *Blade*, the character of Angela is transformed by the image others create for her. However, Nolan resists such transformation. It is through this resistance that her journey on stage becomes not a set of answers about race and gender identities, but questions. It is also through this resistance that she offers an alternative to invasion: an offer of participation.

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[109] A portion of this chapter was presented at Canadian Cultural Studies Conference at the University of Toronto in March of 1994. A further developed version of that paper was published in Australasian Drama Studies special focus issue entitled "Theatre and the Canadian Imaginary" in October of 1996. My thanks to editor Joanne Tompkins for her helpful editing and to Dr Debby Thompson for her careful reading and suggestions.

[110] Griffiths and Campbell, 24.

[111] Nolan interview.

[112] Joanne Tompkins, "Infinitely Rehearsing Performance and Identity: *Africa Solo* and *The Book of Jessica*," Canadian Theatre Review 74 (Spring 1993),38.

[113] Tompkins,37.

[114] Kevin Prokosh. "Celebrating this Year's Theatre Season," The Winnipeg Free Press 13 September 1993: D1.

[115] Yvette Nolan,*Blade*, Theatrum Magazine 31 (November/ December/ January 1992/93),3.

[116] Nolan, *Blade*, 3.
[117] Nolan, *Blade*, 3.
[118] The Women in View Festival takes place in Vancouver each winter with a mandate to showcase performance by women.
[119]It seemed telling that the organizers of the festival had difficulties with both the race of the main character and the point of calling the murderer a "hooker killer". The play questions whether he had ever killed a prostitute or not. He saw all young women as prostitutes. As Angela's mother says at the end "I'm beginning to think that maybe if the police had been looking for a man who was killing women, instead of a man who was killing whores, maybe he'd have been stopped a lot sooner." (Nolan,*Blade*, 5)
[120]Nolan interview.
[121]Nolan interview.
[122]Griffiths and Campbell, 20.
[123]Nolan refers to herself as a 'half-breed-, a title Maria Campbell reclaims in her novel of that title.
[124]In referring to her 'white audiences' I am mainly speaking of the theatre she creates *outside* of the PTAM shows she creates in collectives. Popular Theatre Alliance of Manitoba tends to draw a more racially diverse audience.
[125] Nolan interview.
[126] Nolan, *Blade.*, 1.
[127] Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba: The Justice System and Aboriginal People (Winnipeg, 1991), 2.
[128] See: Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba: The deaths of Helen Betty Osborne and John Joseph Harper, 1.
[129] Nolan, *Blade*, 5.
[130] Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak,"Questions of Multiculturalism" The Post–Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York, 1990), 61.
[131]Linda Kintz. "The Sanitized Spectacle: What's Birth Got To Do With It? Adrienne Kennedy's 'A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White'," Theatre Journal 44,1 (1992): 66.
[132] Spivak, 63.
[133] Yvette Nolan. *Child*, Australasian Drama Studies 29 (October 1996), 112.
[134]Nolan, *Child*, 112.

Conclusion:

When I began to prepare for the dramaturgy I would do on *Annie Mae's Movement*, I found there was little critical context within which to evaluate and understand Nolan's previous work, or models on which to fashion our working relationship as a dramaturg who is white and a writer who is Aboriginal. Therefore, before beginning work on the text, and to aid my future focus on the text of the play itself, I set as my project the development of that context.

This thesis provides one approach to the work that a white dramaturg can do in preparation as s/he approaches the work of a Native playwright. It represents the process which led to working on the text of *Annie Mae's Movement*. Academically the project has value in that it addresses a gap that exists in current scholarship - the question of how to contextualize, evaluate, and continue intercultural work between a Native writer and her dramaturg. It has been valuable personally because it has helped me to understand my own process generally, and my own process with Yvette Nolan specifically, which I believe will advance the working relationship and the theatre work we do together. This is preparation that I see as a significant contribution to the text by Nolan, because it recognizes the history of Aboriginal writers, and the white influence on that writing.

In Chapter One "Paving the Way", I focused on steps that led to the emergence of Aboriginal stage writers. These precursors came in the form of Aboriginal characters written, and most often performed, by non-Native theatre artists. I point to the significance of George Ryga's *Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, and other plays by white writers as significant moments in the history which led to Aboriginal writers presenting their own characters on Canadian stages.

In Chapter Two "Naming Names: Aboriginal Theatre in Canada", I looked to a more recent history. Focusing mainly on the work since the 1980's, as that was the time of greatest growth in Canadian Native theatre, I outlined a history of Native playwrights and the impact they have had on contemporary Canadian theatre. Through the combination of the first two chapters, I compiled a skeletal history of "Aboriginal plays" by both white and Aboriginal writers. Although I made no attempt to detail a complete history, as that would be a complete thesis unto itself, I have created a framework which leads us toward a contemporary playwright such as Nolan. I chose this method because I was interested in highlighting the ways in which history has an impact upon contemporary writers who are Native, as well as those dramaturgs and others theatre professionals who work with them. Nolan's work is necessarily influenced in its form and content by the work that has gone before it. By looking at those histories, I traced what I believe is one aspect of a solid dramaturgical approach - to understand what has gone before,

and how that might affect both the writer and audience's experience of an individual play.

This approach brought me to Chapter Three "Colonizing and Yvette Nolan: The Making of an Aboriginal Playwright." This chapter traced the path I have taken ideologically, from mentally pigeon-holing Nolan into a preconceived concept of nativeness, to more recent developments, where together we have begun to find a working method which respects and acknowledges the history of other similar relationships, as well as making room for our own personal relationship. I looked to the creation of *Jessica* by Maria Campbell and Linda Griffiths as an example of valuable and problematic attempts to work interculturally in the Canadian theatre of our recent past. This was not an easy journey to report, as in the very writing I often questioned at what points appropriation and colonization begin and potentially end, and where academic and dramaturgical work fits in this struggle. In the end, however, this ideological and professional journey has led me to believe that because of our acknowledgment of these issues, and the continued dialogue about them, Nolan and I have a firm foundation on which to build a fruitful working method.

The creation of this thesis has affected my work in several ways. Most significantly it affected my other dramaturgical work on *Annie Mae's Movement*, which meant working closely with Nolan to develop and refine

the play in preparation for production. Understanding the history of Aboriginal characters on the Canadian stage, as well as the writers who created them, has made me a better dramaturg for this project because I could advise with confidence, a sense of history, and some understanding of the difficulties that others have had in similar working situations. As a result of this, and Nolan's evolution as a writer, *Annie Mae's Movement* is a piece of which we are both proud.

This project has also led me to question my assumptions, specifically pertaining to race and gender issues, about the other writers with whom I work; not only those who are non-white or female. As Adrienne Kennedy's quote in my third chapter demonstrates,[146] race is not only the province of the non-white, nor gender that of the female.

In addition, this research into contemporary Native theatre has heightened my concern about the health of Native theatre production. Although significant gains have been made in the development of Native theatre companies, the financial crisis that has affected most Canadian theatre over the last decade seems to be on the verge of diminishing these. I recently received a call from Yvette informing me that Red Roots Theatre, which had planned to produce the piece in May of 1997, has been forced through actor unavailability[147] and financial difficulty to postpone twice, and now has rescheduled production for September of 1998. It remains to be seen whether

this production date will go ahead. Much of the delay is linked to a combination of lack of resources and too high expectations. As a relatively new company entering its fourth year of operation in early 1997, Red Roots Theatre were given a former retail building by a generous local businessman for one dollar. The donation of the building was specifically earmarked for a new theatre space for the company. Unfortunately, what initially looked like a boon became an unwieldy responsibility. The renovations required to make it into a viable and legal theatre space have threatened to sink the company, exhausting their few resources and tiny staff. In the end, it has not been the theatrical work that has fatigued the company, but the strains of having too many new things to learn too fast, with too few resources. The extraordinary stresses upon minority theatre makers to which Robin Breon and Brenda Kamino refer in my second chapter,[148] have compounded this problem.

Further to this concern about the health of Native theatre production, Nolan recently received a workshop of *Annie Mae's Movement* at Weesakeechak Begins To Dance at Native Earth Theatre. N.E.P.A.I. is interested in producing the play next season, *if* there is a next season. During the week of its public reading, the theatre publicly announced it is on the brink of financial failure. In eastern Canada, Mary Vingoe at Eastern Front Theatre wished to bring in a touring production of the piece in May of 1998, but there is no production to bring.

Nolan may be left with a play which, more than any other she has written, is for and about the Aboriginal community. *Annie Mae's Movement* is an overtly political play in which Nolan takes on both A.I.M. and the F.B.I.. Aquash is presented as a martyr whose inevitable death is foreshadowed throughout this cyclical play. The action, centred around several Native communities in the United States and Canada, demands two strong actors who are Native, one of whom plays a variety of roles, and the other who plays the emotionally challenging and physical role of Annie Mae. The play also features a character out of Native mythology. Having avoided many of the typical subjects of Native writing in her earlier works, *Annie Mae's Movement* comes closest to fulfilling expectations of what a Native writer 'should' write about and may ironically, be the one which does not make it into the public eye.

My dramaturgical approach to working with Nolan on this play has been informed both by what other Native writers are doing, and by the theatrical landscape from within which they write. That context has led me to believe that by avoiding the foregrounding of a Native subject in her earlier plays, Nolan challenged assumptions about who she was and what she should write about. Now, by writing a play about an Aboriginal woman, Nolan surprises us again, seeming to change the rules in midstream. The possibility that of all of Nolan's plays, *Annie Mae's Movement* may not be produced offers a disturbing footnote to the story of the invisible Native in Nolan's career. The

story could potentially disappear, not by the agency of an individual or an organization but through circumstances.

As a playwright who wants to see her work produced but finds no home for it in her home community, Nolan is left with the option to self-produce. This gives Nolan significant control over the presentation of her own work, a strategy which Tomson Highway employed early in his career. However, this is not a problem-free alternative to 'shopping' the play to Artistic Directors. Nolan's self-production may further marginalize her from mainstream Canadian theatre, decreasing her chances for a more profitable association with an established theatre. Nonetheless, Nolan is determined to get her work produced.

The final way in which this project has affected me is that it has changed my own investment in Nolan's work. I understand its significance and its obstacles. I want to continue to find the ways in which I can responsibly and proactively continue my work with Yvette Nolan, instead of choosing only to avoid the relationship because of its politically incendiary potential in this time when concerns about appropriation are, and I believe should be, of major consideration. Developing this thesis has been one way for me to understand the complexities that act on our work and to allow myself to embrace rather than avoid them.

I recently received a letter from Nolan in which she responded to the news that *Annie Mae's Movement* may finally be produced by Red Roots Theatre.

> So now, we're on the verge here with Annie Mae, the sense that this could be THE ONE and the disquieting thought that I have finally capitulated, delivering the Indian play, fulfilling the early promise of important native playwright. [...]Not that I can worry about this, heading into production. The play is the play that it is, and the analysis will come later. But come it will, I know, from you, as my chronicler and collaborator, and from others, if they notice me this time around.
>
> I remember the first time I saw my name and work in an academic analysis - it was Diane Bessai, I think, in that book that Per [Brask] edited - remember feeling validated because someone took the time and energy to try and deconstruct some of my work. And then Australia, when I did my speak in front of 500 women, academics and artists all, and realized that I knew things about MY work from YOUR work...
>
> You know the linguistic theory that the thought process is not complete until we put it into words? Well, that is, I think, the way we work together. I write the impulse, the subconscious thought, can't think about what's coming out of my fingers too hard or the impulse evaporates, the way you remember something on the tip of your

tongue by NOT thinking about it. You, you say in words, out loud, what it is I have been doing. You ask me if this is what I MEANT, because this is what it SAYS, to you. And it works, I think, because we serve the play, SERVE THE PLAY, serve the play. I trust you to split your self into dramaturg and academic, one in the present moment, one with an eye to the future. And knowing you are doing that, I am released to just open up the channels and write, and worry about the other stuff later.

Funny that we rarely talk about this, about the process, about the way we work together. Or not so funny, maybe, when you think about it, that superstition I have about speaking it out loud, the idea that you are the one who verbalizes it, and I just take that for granted.

Nolan and I are considering a self-production of *Annie Mae's Movement* in Winnipeg this fall if Red Roots Theatre is forced to cancel again. The possibility of producing *Annie Mae's Movement* together in Winnipeg marks a new stage in our professional relationship; however, this working relationship has thrived on its fluidity. We have frequently changed roles and our ways of operating according to the demands of the work. Right now the demand is to get the work produced, get feedback on that work, and through that experience, potentially improve future plays. Nolan is a

playwright whose work has value, but no home in the current theatrical landscape of Winnipeg. One must be created.

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[146] See page 80, footnote 131, of Chapter Three.

[147] Despite the significant increase in Aboriginal actors there is still difficulty in finding trained actors for Native theatre who are Aboriginal. The character of God in *Job's Wife* was played by an actor with no stage experience and little film experience. It is an ongoing problem even in communities like Winnipeg where the Aboriginal population is significant. With the emergence of companies such as Red Roots Theatre and Shakespeare on the Red, this situation is changing, but slowly

[148] See page 35, footnote 64, of Chapter One.

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